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## ONE DEAD FREEDMAN: EVERYDAY RACIAL VIOLENCE, BLACK FREEDOM, AND AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP, 1863-1871

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ONE DEAD FREEDMAN: EVERYDAY RACIAL VIOLENCE, BLACK FREEDOM,  
AND AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP, 1863-1871

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

By  
Jacob Alan Glover

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Amy Murrell Taylor, Associate Professor of History and Gender and  
Women's Studies

Lexington, Kentucky

2017

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### ONE DEAD FREEDMAN: EVERYDAY RACIAL VIOLENCE, BLACK FREEDOM, AND AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP, 1863-1871

This dissertation is the first comprehensive study of “everyday” racial violence in the postbellum South. Taking as its focus the states of Louisiana and Kentucky, *One Dead Freedman* juxtaposes the practical enactment of black citizenship against daily racial terrorism by incorporating personal, familial, and community testimony left behind by African Americans who had a direct experience with such violence. Within this dissertation, the terminology of “everyday violence” is employed to differentiate the more mundane forms of white violence from the more spectacular forms of Reconstruction-era violence such as lynching, the Ku Klux Klan, and race riots. Thus, the definition of everyday violence includes anything from verbal threats all the way to the brutal beatings, whippings, and murders that were so commonplace as to not draw attention from the local and national media.

*One Dead Freedman* is organized both thematically and chronologically, and it examines everyday racial violence in five distinct “spaces”: military enlistment; the workplace; the household; schools; and voting stations. This dissertation pays close attention to what each of these spaces meant to black Southerners during the first years of emancipation, and, then, digs into what forms, or types, of violence were utilized by white Southerners in each. *One Dead Freedman* concludes that white Southerners used racial violence in an effort to circumscribe the practical enactment of black citizenship on a daily basis during Reconstruction. This violence was, ironically, both pervasive and diffuse, and served to undercut the position of African Americans in the South, and America at large, far beyond 1877 by limiting black mobility and autonomy in both private and public spaces in which African Americans defined the meaning of their own freedom. The persistence of this violence, and its legacy, was central to the enduring power of racism in America through the Civil Rights Movement and even into modern America.

KEYWORDS: African American History; Southern History; Violence; Racial Violence;  
Civil War and Reconstruction

Jacob Alan Glover

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May 17, 2017

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Date

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AND AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP, 1863-1871

By

Jacob Alan Glover

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Dr. Amy Murrell Taylor  
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May 17, 2017  
Date

*For those who refuse to be silent*

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## Introduction – “One Freedman...”

*One Dead Freedman* asks that the reader reconsider how we tell the story of Reconstruction. It begins with a simple question: how did Americans get the “peace” after the Civil War so wrong? The answer to that inquiry leads us, alarmingly quickly, to the depths of human depravity and despair. The quick reply, to borrow a few lines from W.E.B. Du Bois, is that had “no Negroes survived the war, peace would have been difficult because of hatred, loss and bitter grief. But its logical path would have been straight....But there was the black man looming like a dark ghost on the horizon.”<sup>1</sup> That racial hatred was so vitriolic, that the peace became so violent, and that the nation largely failed in its effort extend civil rights to the newly emancipated, however, has lent the period of Reconstruction a narrative arc that is despairingly tragic.

This dissertation, the first comprehensive study of everyday racial violence in the postbellum South, contends that the tragic interpretation of Reconstruction is both unfair and highly selective. At the same time, I argue that the Union effort to integrate the freedmen into American society was no farce intended to mask personal greed and blind ambition. If reality, as it usually does, lies between these two historiographical tent poles, we can more closely glimpse historical truth by examining the lives of the black Southerners who had more at stake than any other group in the redefinition of American

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<sup>1</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2013 [1935]), 212.

society after the Civil War.<sup>2</sup> *One Dead Freedman* juxtaposes the practical enactment of black citizenship against the devastation of daily racial terrorism by incorporating personal, familial, and community testimony left behind by African Americans who had a direct experience with racial violence. In the broadest sense, everyday racial violence was simply the lived experience that black and white Southerners had with racial violence in all its different forms. More specifically, I employ the terminology of “everyday violence” here to differentiate the more common and mundane forms of white violence from the more spectacular forms of violence such as lynching, the Ku Klux Klan, and race riots.<sup>3</sup> Thus, my definition of everyday violence includes anything from verbal threats all the way to the brutal beatings, whippings, and murders that were so commonplace as to not draw attention from the local and national media. This dissertation concludes that such violence circumscribed, limited, and deformed the meaning of American citizenship for black Southerners; and, it emphasizes that everyday

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<sup>2</sup> As Adam Rothman has noted, the “historiography of Reconstruction revolves around” the question of whether or not the Civil War led to a “new birth of freedom” for African Americans. Within that framework, however, historians have developed a body of literature that is vast, nuanced, and quite remarkable in its complexity. For a brief but insightful overview, see Rothman, “Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction,” in Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr, eds., *American History Now* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 75-95. The “tent poles” that I mention here refer to studies that dissect the overall meaning and thrust of the Union’s intentions during the course of Reconstruction. The standard history of the era that focuses on the experience of the freedpeople and argues that Reconstruction was a largely failed effort to extend civil rights to the newly emancipated remains Eric Foner’s 1988 overview. See Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). On the other hand, Mark Wahlgren Summers has convincingly argued that the Union was less interested in the rights of the freedmen than many scholars have wanted to admit. As a result, Summers interpreted Reconstruction as a “success” because it accomplished the federal government’s main goal: restoring the Union. See Summers, *The Ordeal of the Reunion: A New History of Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> This does not preclude some overlap between these two classifications of violence. To note only one prominent example, the violence of the Ku Klux Klan—or, what came to be known as “Klan” violence—was often extraordinary, but it could also include mundane forms of violence that were not necessarily covered by local and national media. See Elaine Frantz Parsons, *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan during Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

racial violence became so deeply embedded in daily life that it continued to influence and define black opportunity long after the Union withdrew its last troops.

Sometime in the spring of 1868, the decision was made in the New Orleans' offices of General R.C. Buchanan, the man then serving as the Assistant Commissioner for the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands in the state of Louisiana, to compile a detailed ledger of the reported outrages and murders committed against and upon freedmen across the state for the remainder of the calendar year. This register, which ultimately covered the period from early May until December 15, was similar to other compendiums of violence that were assembled at various Bureau offices at other times during Reconstruction in its quest to sort, categorize, and make numerical sense of the waves of racial terrorism that afflicted the Pelican State. As clerks under Buchanan's direction—and, after August 24, the watchful eye of the new Assistant Commissioner, General Edward Hatch—dutifully pored through the tri-monthly and special reports that arrived daily in the Crescent City from locations near and far, the vague outlines of the unmitigated violence of white supremacy began to draw more clearly into focus. Only a year earlier, in response to a directive from the War Department to submit a list of the outrages perpetrated against freedpeople from the establishment of the Bureau in Louisiana until February 20, 1867, General Joseph Mower admitted that there “can be no doubt but that...many murders and outrages have been committed which will never be brought to right.” Although there was little hope that this new index would capture every

violent crime, it was a substantial effort to secure justice and recognition for the thousands upon thousands of victims. It would be a macabre record, indeed.<sup>4</sup>

In quantitative terms, the register confirmed what African Americans across the postbellum South had long since realized: they were under daily assault from white terrorists bent on retaining political, economic, and social control of the South. All told, over 300 specific outrages were catalogued in the register, ranging all the way from verbal threats and whippings to more malicious assaults, rape, and murder.<sup>5</sup> Although

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<sup>4</sup> Louisiana Assistant Commissioner, "Murders & Outrages from May 10/68 to Dec 15/68"; "Report of Murders, Outrages, Assaults, etc. Committed on and by Freedmen since organizing of Bureau to Feb'y 20<sup>th</sup> in State of Louisiana," in Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Louisiana, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869, Record Group 105, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, National Archives Microfilm Publication M1027 (hereafter cited as Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1027), reel no. 34.

<sup>5</sup> The specific register discussed here is only one of over a dozen such compendiums that are contained in the records of the Freedmen's Bureau for the state of Louisiana. There is a great deal on inconsistency between the registers, both in terms of how much time they cover and the size of the reporting area. Some registers, for instance, contain only complaints from a single parish during one month. A number of the registers also contain "recapitulations," a detailed quantitative breakdown of the racial violence that was reported. These assessments normally indicate only the numbers of "outrages" and do not include the specific number of black Southerners affected. Others registers, however, are narrative in structure with no numerical analysis. To further complicate matters, many of the compendiums overlap chronologically with one another. It is also apparent that clerks in Bureau headquarters were making decisions about whether or not an outrage was "important" enough to include in the register. One compendium, labeled the "Report of Murders and Other Outrages Committed in the State of Louisiana, during the Month of October 1868 as Reported to Headquarters Bureau R, F, and A Lands, New Orleans La," indicated that 124 outrages had been committed which "resulted in death," as well as 44 "other" outrages. When compared to the register that is discussed in the text here, it is obvious that more outrages have been included in the ledger dedicated specifically to October 1868 than in the statewide report. Still, perhaps more violence was left out than included. In a section of "General Remarks," a clerk discussed the decision to compile less than half of the reported outrages in the register. "In addition to the above [the 178 outrages] there has been reported by agents during the past month about 250 complaints of a minor nature consisting of defrauding freedmen of wages of share of Crops, Driving them from Homes and Plantations Robbery. Depriving them of their registration papers, [et cetera]." It is unlikely that black families considered being driven from their homes by racial violence a "minor" inconvenience, but such was the Bureau's reasoning. Together, these registers contain several thousand outrages that are specifically recorded from 1865 to 1868. And that was only in the state of Louisiana. See Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 34. The outrage registers begin at Target 8. These outrage reports were also compiled in Kentucky, but I have found nothing as systematic as was the case in Louisiana. Part of the reason for this may have been the existence of the Freedmen's Courts in Kentucky. These courts were essentially military tribunals at which freedmen could swear out affidavits and bring charges against white Kentuckians who had outraged them. For the records of the Freedmen's Court in Louisville, see Records of the Field Offices of the State of Kentucky, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872, Record Group 105, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, National Archives Microfilm Publication M1904 (hereafter cited as Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1904), reels no. 119 and 120.

imprecise reporting, in particular the tendency to use words and phrases such as “several,” “large,” and “an unknown number,” makes it impossible to discern exactly how many black Southerners were impacted by these acts of violence, it is safe to assert that the compendium represented at least two thousand African American Louisianans who had come directly into contact with white terrorism.<sup>6</sup> For hundreds of these individuals, their entry contains mostly non-descript identifiers that indicate age and gender but little else. The most commonly reported outrages were variations of “assault,” “killed,” and “shot,” but there were also five reported rapes, four hangings, and two cases of highways robbery. At times, the obvious difficulty of partitioning widespread violence into neat categories became too much and new classifications, such as “Repeated Murder,” were required.

Behind every number of course, there was a human being. Striking in its ability to provide some semblance of mathematical clarity, the register of outrages revealed far less about the personal, familial, and community tragedies that befell thousands upon thousands of black Southerners. In the aftermath of a brutal, racially-motivated slaughter in far northwestern Louisiana that drew minimal national attention, Thomas F. Monroe, Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Caddo and Bossier Parishes, lamented that the number of dead freedmen “will reach nearly One hundred,” but that the existing state of terror made it impossible for him to discover the identity of the victims or the

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<sup>6</sup> This estimate is most likely extremely low. The race riot in Bossier Parish in September 1868, for instance, only received one entry and no exact figure was given for the number of victims even though “at least” one hundred African American men and women were murdered in the aftermath. Other limitations abound. When whites broke into freedmen’s houses, the register often only listed the male head-of-household and did not indicate number of children, relatives, or any boarders living there. It was also common for a number of crimes to be lumped into a single entry, and “one outrage” might really be hiding hundreds of victims. Thus, there are single entries for actions such as a group of whites breaking into houses in a neighborhood or the general practice of evicting black families when the husband and father refused to join area Democratic Clubs.

perpetrators: “If I should attempt it, I am of the opinion that I would share the fate of some of the missing freedmen.”<sup>7</sup>

Although there would be no national outcry like the one that followed an earlier race “riot” in New Orleans in the summer of 1866, historians have cited the events in Bossier Parish in October 1868, and other similarly violent episodes, as evidence of the concerted plans of white terrorists to return Louisiana, and the entire South, to “home rule” through violent means.<sup>8</sup> But what of the victims? What of the hundreds of black Americans in Bossier Parish in October 1868, slaughtered first because of their Radical political beliefs, and then for simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time, who were murdered in cold blood because they believed that the nation should make good on its promises of equality? Like so many other faceless, nameless victims of white terror, these individuals were relegated to the status of footnotes by white officials, casualties of a political struggle—forgotten in the bloody turmoil of Reconstruction. While the Bureau’s attempt to collect information regarding outrages in Louisiana did yield the personal information of numerous individuals, the circumstances of Southern life meant that many times field agents succumbed to the same reality as Thomas Monroe. Writing in December 1868 from Houma, M.W. Morris, Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Terrebonne Parish, reported that yet another outrage had been committed, and an unknown person had been “found dead in field 8 miles from town.” With no other information on hand, the clerk in New Orleans repeated an entry that had been made

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas F. Monroe to Lieutenant J.M. Lee, October 12, 1868, in Records of the Field Offices For the State of Louisiana, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1863-1872, Record Group 105, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, National Archives Microfilm Publication M1905 (hereafter cited as Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1905), reel no. 100.

<sup>8</sup> On the riot in Bossier Parish, see Ted Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism, and Race in Louisiana, 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 155-156.



hundreds of times before in the “On Whom Committed” column of the outrage register: “One Freedman.”<sup>9</sup>

And there it was. One person’s life, a revolting act of violence, and a family’s tragedy, all wrapped neatly into two words that comprised the entirety of an individual’s written historical record. In so many ways, this was the insidious cost of everyday racial violence: its ability to normalize white supremacist terrorism, and effectively eliminate black Southerners from the American consciousness and, ultimately, Southern history itself. Although it would appear counterintuitive to suggest that the widespread existence of racial violence served to support its seeming anonymity in the white American public conscience, the daily repetition of murders, assaults, rapes, threats, whippings, and more, slowly allowed white Americans to accept such brutality as simply part of the routine of postbellum life. As it became ingrained in the course of Reconstruction, moreover, it was apparent that white America had become desensitized and exhausted by the sheer volume of complaints and outrages. It was still common for newspapers, community leaders, and Bureau officials vociferously to denounce the terrorism that occurred in their localities, but it was difficult for white Americans, as a group, to maintain the vigilance—and, in many instances, the military force—that would have been required to extend justice to the freedpeople. As a result, what should have been sensational became mundane, and white terrorists used violence to obliterate the equitable intentions of Radical Reconstruction. As they did so, they rewrote history, erasing black Southerners from the historical record

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<sup>9</sup> Louisiana Assistant Commissioner, “Murders & Outrages from May 10/68 to Dec 15/68,” in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 34.

the same as the voting rolls. One black man's life, so it seemed in the postbellum South, would be worth two words.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to the weary acceptance with which most Americans seemed to have rationalized everyday racial violence, however, were the “extraordinary” examples of white terrorism.<sup>11</sup> Instead of burying victims in anonymity through the sheer overwhelming force of mundanity, exceptional violence struck a chord, shocked the nation, and *made* history. During Reconstruction, the two major components of extraordinary racial violence were the various race riots and white paramilitary units—most famously, the Ku Klux Klan and the White Leagues. Simply put, racial massacres in locales such as New Orleans, Memphis, Colfax, and Hamburg became crucial pieces of the story of postbellum America, illuminating both the democratic potential of Reconstruction and the final abandonment of African Americans by white Northerners. The Klan, the Knights of the White Camelia, and other similar groups, also became known for their brazen terrorism, open defiance of Republican governments, assorted political chicanery, and their shrouds of secrecy.<sup>12</sup> During the peak of its influence, in

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<sup>10</sup> The notion of eradicating African Americans from public life in the South was a prominent feature of Democratic political rhetoric in the decades after the Civil War. In the early 1900s, Benjamin Tillman, a U.S. Senator from South Carolina, stated in Congress that white Southerners had “done our level best” to disfranchise African Americans. He added, “we have scratched our heads to find out how we could eliminate the last one of them. We stuffed ballot boxes. We shot them. We are not ashamed of it.” Quoted in Rayford Whittingham Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* (New York: Dial Press, 1954), 91.

<sup>11</sup> Kidada E. Williams has argued persuasively that historians have remained “transfixed” by extraordinary violence. See Williams, “Resolving the Paradox of our Lynching Fixation: Reconsidering Racialized Violence in the American South after Slavery,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 6 (Sept., 2005), pp. 323-350; Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (New York: University Press, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Although the Klan, the Knights of the White Camelia, and the White Leagues are often mentioned together, in reality they were very different groups that existed separately of one another. The Klan originally organized in Tennessee in 1866, and had emerged as a powerful terrorist group by 1868. Although Klan-like activities continued into the 1870s, the Klan, for all intents and purposes, had ceased to function as an organization by 1872 at the latest. The Knights of the White Camelia organized in Louisiana in 1867 and were similar to the Klan, but they too had disbanded by the early 1870s. Like the Klan, the Knights of the White Camelia usually attempted to hide the identity of their members. The White Leagues,

fact, the Klan was so widely known, and feared, that Americans tended to classify nearly all reported racial violence as Klan-related, a propensity that only heightened the group's contemporaneous and historical infamy.<sup>13</sup> After the fall of the Reconstruction governments and the restoration of "home rule," the practice of lynching, especially the murders that became public spectacles, was particularly singled-out by white Northerners and all black Americans and branded as a Southern problem with horrific consequences for individuals and communities. From national anti-lynching campaigns to proposed Congressional legislation that would have made lynching a federal crime, these grotesque, ritualistic killings both shocked and horrified the nation in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century.

By and large, like contemporary Americans in the postbellum period, historians have remained transfixed by what Kidada E. Williams has termed the "extraordinary" in Southern racial violence. In short, the historiography has been dominated by scholarly analyses of lynching, terroristic organizations such as the Klan, and the myriad race riots and massacres that erupted across the South after the Civil War.<sup>14</sup> Although perhaps too narrowly focused on the extraordinary, modern scholars have created an analytic framework in which to understand violence. In other words, Southern racial violence

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in comparison, did not emerge until 1874 in New Orleans and were directly associated with the Democratic Party's effort to keep blacks from voting and remove the last vestiges of Republican power from the South. Unlike the Klan, the White Leagues actively advertised their existence and sought public support. See Justin A. Nystrom, *New Orleans after the Civil War: Race, Politics, and a New Birth of Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Nicholas Lemann, *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006). Thomas Nast's illustration of the supposed partnership between the White Leagues and the Ku Klux Klan that kept black Southerners in a state "Worse than Slavery" is one of the seminal images of Reconstruction. See *Harper's Weekly*, October 24, 1874.

<sup>13</sup> Both Allen W. Trelease and Elaine Frantz Parsons have noted this tendency. See Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995 [1971]); Parsons, *Ku-Klux*.

<sup>14</sup> While this essay will focus on lynching and other forms of extra-legal violence in the South, the literature on American violence in general is also skewed towards the "extraordinary." See Michael J. Pfeifer, *The Roots of Rough Justice: The Origins of American Lynching* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

was not simply an inevitable outcome of the fall of slavery. Rather, racial violence in the South was indelibly connected to specific political, economic, social, and cultural developments in the aftermath of the Civil War. As the 1868 register of outrages and murders in Louisiana forces us to realize, however, racial violence was hardly confined to the spectacle lynchings of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century or the brief, terroristic reign of the Ku Klux Klan. As Leon Litwack has noted, for African Americans it “was impossible to dismiss examples of white violence as aberrations; they were too much a part of everyday life.”<sup>15</sup> The importance of everyday violence, such as verbal threats, whippings, property destruction, forced evictions, and more, however, has been submerged by the scholarly emphasis on “extraordinary” racial violence. Lynching, the Klan, and race riots deserve their due historical attention—but a myopic outlook that focuses exclusively on such exceptional violence has hindered the development of a more complete understanding of how violence operated on the everyday level. In brief, historians have fallen victim to the same impulses as the Americans who lived through Reconstruction: they have normalized what should be understood as “extraordinary.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 14.

<sup>16</sup> The literature on racial violence from the Civil War to the end of the nineteenth century is vast. For some works that have influenced my thinking, see Stephen V. Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis: The Race Riot that Shook the Nation One Year after the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013); James K. Hogue, *Uncivil War: Five New Orleans Street Battles and the Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011); George C. Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984); Foner, *Reconstruction*; Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Summers, *The Ordeal of the Reunion*; Douglas R. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); Aaron Astor, *Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012); James Michael Rhyne, “Rehearsal for Redemption: The Politics of Post-Emancipation Violence in Kentucky” (PhD diss., University of Cincinnati, 2007); Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction*; Joe Gray Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed, 1863-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974); Justin A. Nystrom, *New Orleans after the Civil War: Race, Politics, and a New Birth of Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Nicholas Lemann, *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006); Trelease, *White Terror*; Scott Reynolds Nelson,

In large part this fixation on lynching and other forms of extreme racial violence has been driven by two related factors: the impressive documentation of the “red record” and the enthrallment of historians and contemporaries with the visual, statistical, and print representations of such extraordinary violence. As Williams has noted, the intense contemporary interest in the “extralegal and spectacular components of mob violence by women and men of that period had the effect of excluding the other, more ordinary, individual and private forms of violence that white southerners had used to subjugate African Americans since emancipation.”<sup>17</sup> As a result, the records, both visual and written, that document extraordinary racial violence are voluminous. Detailed accounts of frenzied mobs, their victims, the farcical nature of mob “justice,” and subsequent justifications and reaction have allowed historians to craft a vast and impressive literature on extraordinary violence that is incredibly contextualized. Furthermore, scholars—and many other Americans—have been both horrified and captivated by visual representations of spectacular violence. Much like Americans are drawn to violent war

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*Iron Confederacies: Southern Railways, Klan Violence, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Lou Falkner Williams, *The Great South Carolina Ku Klux Klan Trials, 1871-1872* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996); Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Carole Emberton, *Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South after the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); LeeAnna Keith, *The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror, and the Death of Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Parsons, *Ku-Klux*; W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black/White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Crystal Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and “Legal Lynchings”* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); Stewart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Michael Ayers Trotti, “What Counts: Trends in Racial Violence in the Postbellum South,” *Journal of American History* 100 (Sept., 2013), pp. 375-400; Amy Kate Bailey and Stewart Emory Tolnay, *Lynched: The Victims of Southern Mob Violence* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Williams, “Resolving the Paradox of our Lynching Fixation,” 325.

movies, historians have also been moved by exhibits and published books that portray the images of lynching that have become so entwined with notions of Southern racial violence. The success of one recent book-turned-exhibit, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, encapsulated both the influence that such scholarship can have, as well as the limited interpretive appeal of vivid imagery.<sup>18</sup>

Within this framework, however, historians have made significant contributions to our understanding of racial violence and they continue to approach the subject from fresh analytical perspectives. From a national vantage point, a number of scholars have stressed that violence played a critical role in the rolling-back of Reconstruction and the oppression of black Southerners in the postbellum era. Both George Rable and Eric Foner argued that Conservative whites resorted to varying levels of organized racial violence in their quest to overthrow the Radicals. According to Rable, groups like the Ku Klux Klan became “the military arm of the Democratic party” and used “terrorism to eliminate opposition leaders and to strike fear into the hearts of rank-and-file Republicans, both black and white.”<sup>19</sup> Turning his focus to working-class black politics, Steven Hahn’s sweeping overview of the postwar era concluded an assessment of the South’s “paramilitary politics” by resolving rather bluntly that “political power in the Reconstruction South grew out of the barrel of a gun.”<sup>20</sup> Two recent studies of Reconstruction by Mark Wahlgren Summers and Douglas R. Egerton also emphasized how Conservatives employed violence to undermine the implementation of Union policy. Although Summers and Egerton disagreed as to what the Republicans hoped to

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 323-324.

<sup>19</sup> Rable, *But There Was No Peace*, xi-xiii, 86-88, 91-102; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 119-123, 425-444, 604.

<sup>20</sup> Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 281.

accomplish in the South, both surmised that Conservative violence became detrimental to Radical aims, and effectively curtailed the establishment of real democracy in the South.<sup>21</sup>

More localized studies of Reconstruction have similarly concluded that racial violence was both widespread and intended to bring about the end of biracialism in American public life. Joe Gray Taylor and Ted Tunnell argued that Reconstruction in Louisiana was beset by nearly unimaginable levels of terror and murder. The violence was so disruptive during the 1874 electoral season, Taylor concluded, that there “is no way short of black magic to determine who won the election...in Louisiana.”<sup>22</sup> In his treatment of Reconstruction in Louisiana’s Sugar Parishes, John C. Rodrigue lamented that political campaigns in the Pelican State “witnessed unparalleled brutality,” and that it “would be difficult to exaggerate the violence that wracked Louisiana during the [1868] presidential campaign.”<sup>23</sup> Justin Nystrom and James K. Hogue asserted in separate studies that the growth of the White Leagues and the “militarization of street politics” in New Orleans during Reconstruction was, in many ways, simply a carryover from the conflicts of the Civil War: “As indefensible as we might judge such actions today, the Civil War was largely responsible for making violence a *legitimate* extension of political discourse.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Summers, *Ordeal of the Reunion*; Egerton, *Wars of Reconstruction*. In a chapter dedicated to the year 1867, Summers teases out the astonishing level of everyday violence in Southern elections. According to Summers, white employers used “their economic clout to keep dependents home. The continued sporadic, almost casual violence against field hands and domestics failing to live up to their employers’ notion of faithful servants gave a chilling reminder of where most of the physical power would lie once the military was withdrawn.” Quoted from *Ordeal of the Reunion*, 128-129.

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed*, 302; Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction*.

<sup>23</sup> John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana’s Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 100.

<sup>24</sup> Quotations are from Nystrom, *New Orleans after the Civil War*, 80, 162; Hogue, *Uncivil War*.

Aaron Astor's examination of the Reconstruction of the upper South states of Kentucky and Missouri argued that the "political purpose of this epidemic" of postwar violence was to "disrupt, intimidate, and stifle black aspirations for equal citizenship in a biracial republic." By the early 1870s, this violence had evolved in response to black resistance in Kentucky and Missouri, as "white conservatives now found the black population to be economically unnecessary and socially dangerous." Astor's conclusions supported an earlier study of racial violence in Kentucky by George C. Wright that highlighted racial terrorism in the Border South after the Civil War: "This violence would be just as severe and long-lasting as that found in the Deep South, but too often is escaped the immediate attention of federal officials."<sup>25</sup>

Carole Emberton and Hannah Rosen argued that the racial violence of Reconstruction was heavily influenced by evolving gender roles in the wake of black freedom. Rosen's investigation of sexual violence perpetrated against African American women by white males concluded that night rider violence was a gendered "performance" where white vigilantes and Klan members acted out their racist fantasies, often employing sexual violence far beyond any form necessary to insure political supremacy. The rape of African American women by these night riders, Rosen posited, was a "performance of social and political inequality" that infused notions of gender and race to demonstrate the supposed "lascivious" nature of black women and the inability of African American men to protect their households.<sup>26</sup>

Whereas Rosen analyzed the political repercussions of the violent interactions between white men and black women, Emberton stressed that postwar politics in the

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<sup>25</sup> Astor, *Rebels on the Border*, 10-11, 194; Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, 19-60.

<sup>26</sup> Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 8-11, 181-183.



South were a veritable battleground between white and black males who were desperate to prove their masculinity in the public sphere. Like Rosen, Emberton emphasized the threat that white males perceived in politically and economically assertive African American men. While Rosen investigated how white males attacked black masculinity through mob violence directed against black homes, however, Emberton interpreted the racial violence of the postwar era as a public confrontation between white “Democratic mobs and paramilitary organizations that backed the party” and militarized African American males. That such a confrontation occurred, Emberton concluded, could be traced largely to the importance of “martial manhood” that African American service in the Union armies had cemented. According to Emberton, it was only by demonstrating their manhood that African Americans felt they could continue to lay claim to the fruits of American citizenship. It was such assertiveness, viewed by white male Southerners as an affront to their own manhood, which fueled the growth of the White Leagues, white reprisal, and racial violence.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the focus on racially-charged violence and its effect on the political developments of Reconstruction, a number of historians have analyzed the causes, course, and consequences of exceptionally brutal race “riots.” Gilles Vandal and James G. Hollandsworth, Jr., analyzed the New Orleans massacre of 1866, pinpointing the attack on black Republicans at the Mechanics’ Institute that July as the beginning of the violent struggles of Reconstruction. As Hollandsworth, Jr., stated, “The New Orleans riot ignited a new conflict that raged for more than a decade and thus became to the

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<sup>27</sup> Emberton, *Beyond Redemption*, 8, 104-127, 145. A crucial corollary to this argument is that while the idea of martial manhood opened up the possibility of citizenship for African American males, it subsequently closed any opportunities that black females might have to stake a claim to citizenship on different grounds.

second phase of the Civil War what Fort Sumter had been to the first.”<sup>28</sup> Stephen V. Ash argued that the race riot in Memphis, Tennessee in May 1866 was also linked to the Radical turn of Reconstruction, connecting the indiscriminate slaughter in the Volunteer State to subsequent legislation such as the various Civil Rights Acts and the adoption of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments.<sup>29</sup> Bringing the narrative arc full circle, LeeAnna Keith looked to the Colfax massacre of Easter Sunday 1873 in Grant Parish, Louisiana, as the official death-knell of Reconstruction. In the aftermath of the riot and the Supreme Court’s decision in *U.S. v. Cruikshank*, Keith concluded that white Southerners had withered Northern resistance and achieved the return of “home rule” whereby they might excise the influence of African Americans from Southern politics.<sup>30</sup>

While the terrorist group has occupied a central role in nearly every recent history of Reconstruction, complete, academic treatments of the Klan have remained relatively rare, as only Allen W. Trelease and Elaine Frantz Parsons have undertaken the task in the last fifty years. Writing in the 1970s, Trelease corrected nearly a century of popular misconceptions about the Klan, insisting that the group was intimately connected to the violent Democratic effort to overturn the Reconstruction governments, and that Klan attacks were consistently political and corresponded fairly directly with election cycles and the political calendar. “The overriding purpose of the Ku Klux movement,” Trelease wrote, “no matter how decentralized, was the maintenance or restoration of white supremacy in every walk of life.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> James G. Hollandsworth, Jr., *An Absolute Massacre: The New Orleans Race Riot of July 30, 1866* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 3; Gilles Vandal, *The New Orleans Riot of 1866: Anatomy of a Tragedy* (Baton Rouge: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1984).

<sup>29</sup> Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis*.

<sup>30</sup> Keith, *The Colfax Massacre*, 153-171.

<sup>31</sup> Trelease, *White Terror*, xlvii, 124-125.

While Trelease's interpretation has influenced historians for decades, Parsons's cultural approach to the Klan concluded that it was more an "idea" than any coherent, organized paramilitary group. Building on Steven Hahn's assertion that the Klan was "less a formal organization than a rubric embracing a variety of secret vigilante and paramilitary outfits showing the marks of their local settings," Parsons explored the meaning of the "disembodied" Klan and its uses by both the white North and the white South to debate the merits of black freedom and the course of national policy during Reconstruction. Still, for all its symbolic potency, Parsons insisted that the Klan remained the most "widely proliferated and deadly domestic terroristic movement in the history of the United States."<sup>32</sup>

Moving beyond the era of Reconstruction and into the twentieth century, the most important studies of racial violence have dealt with the practice of lynching. One of the main objectives of these works has been the attempt to uncover the origins and causes of lynching because the amount of violence involved was seemingly so far beyond what was necessary to enforce the social control that whites so desperately sought. Joel Williamson, focusing on the myth of the "black beast rapist," concluded that the repressed sexual desires of white Southern males and an obsession over race created a volatile combination whereby whites lynched blacks to escape the guilt of their own sexual fantasies.<sup>33</sup> Arthur Raper, Stewart E. Tolnay, and E.M. Beck argued for a material

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<sup>32</sup> Hahn, *Nation Under Our Feet*, 267; Parsons, *Ku Klux*, 6, passim. Parsons also demonstrates how "Klan" violence—both the actions perpetrated by the group and those attributed to them by others—tended to blend into "everyday" life in the postbellum South. Thus, it was possible for the extraordinarily violent terrorist group to engage in the type of activities that I have classified under the rubric of "everyday" violence.

<sup>33</sup> Williamson, *Crucible of Race*, 291-295, 306-310. Dianne Sommerville has recently argued that changing legal definitions of interracial sex in the late-nineteenth century to construe any sexual contact between black men and white women as rape was paramount in the "expanded number of black rapists at

causation, contending that it was only the disaster of severe economic downturns “that carried southern society to such outrageous extremes of brutality.”<sup>34</sup> From a cultural perspective, Amy Louise Wood determined that “spectacle” lynchings became community rituals whereby mob violence “imparted powerful messages to whites about their own supposed racial dominance and superiority.”<sup>35</sup>

Donald G. Mathews, Amy Kate Baily, and Karen A. Snedker observed that there were important connections between Southern religion and the practice of lynching. In particular, Mathews carefully considered how the cultural predominance of an emotional evangelicalism in the South allowed whites to imbue lynching and other forms of community punishment with religious overtones. While Mathews stopped short of arguing that “community killing” was a “Christian act,” he did conclude less specifically that ritualized lynchings were seen by some whites as “religious acts” that purified the white community by removing supposedly deviant blacks.”<sup>36</sup>

Lynching scholars have also made a concerted effort to quantitatively assess the influence of such mob violence. Like the registers of outrages compiled by the Freedmen’s Bureau, the practice of “counting” lynchings has allowed historians to better explain local deviations across the South. W. Fitzhugh Brundage argued that cultural

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century’s end, as imagined by many white southerners.” See Sommerville, *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 200-217.

<sup>34</sup> Arthur F. Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933), 36-39; Tolnay and Beck, *A Festival of Violence*. The “South” that Tolnay and Beck analyzed included the former states of the Confederacy and Kentucky—with the exceptions of Virginia and Texas.

<sup>35</sup> Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 2-4. According to Wood, the pictures, postcards, and macabre “souvenirs” that whites produced as mementos of these lynchings served as cultural mediums through which the ideology of white racial superiority flowed through the South—even though the vast majority of Southern whites never participated in or witnessed first-hand a lynch mob in action. See *Ibid.*, 103-111.

<sup>36</sup> Donald G. Mathews, “Lynching is Part of the Religion of Our People: Faith in the Christian South”, in Beth Barton Schweiger and Mathews, eds., *Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in History and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 168-169, 182-183; Amy Kate Bailey and Karen A. Snedker, “Practicing What They Preach?: Lynching and Religion in the American South,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 117, No. 3 (November 2011), 845-846, 872-873.

explanations of mob violence fail “to provide any convincing explanation for regional variations in lynching or to chart its frequency over time.” Through an analysis of the agricultural economies and the political distribution of power in Georgia and Virginia, Brundage concluded that lynching was more common in densely populated areas where “plantation agriculture” was the norm: “Across the South, the presence of staple crops, white landlords, and black laborers may serve as an index of mob violence.”<sup>37</sup> In his magisterial study of the New South, Edward Ayers applied quantitative analysis to lynching and concluded that the “counties most likely to witness lynchings had scattered farms where many black newcomers and strangers lived and worked. These counties were also likely to have few towns, weak law enforcement, poor communication with the outside world, and high levels of transiency among both races.”<sup>38</sup> While Brundage and Ayers reached incompatible conclusions, the effort to quantify racial violence is enlightening. As Michael Ayers Trotti has convincingly argued, while “terror resists quantification,” “counting stands at the very foundation of the study of lynching: its trends help shape the questions we ask of the phenomenon.”<sup>39</sup>

From this incredibly abbreviated overview of the study of racial violence in recent years, a number of trends should already be evident. The first is the breadth of the existing scholarship. From panoramic explorations of Reconstruction to grassroots investigations of Klan activities and lynchings in a single county, historians have

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<sup>37</sup> Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 6-14.

<sup>38</sup> Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 155-157. Ayers furthermore argued that “a relatively low population density and high rates of black population growth” were indicators of a high *rate* of racial violence. The focus on the rate of lynching allowed Ayers to demonstrate that the mountainous region of Appalachia was “the subregion” with the “third highest rate of lynching” in the New South. See Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 501n69-503n71.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Ayers Trotti, “What Counts: Trends in Racial Violence in the Postbellum South,” *Journal of American History* 100 (Sept., 2013), pp. 376-377.

identified, and analyzed the effects of, racial violence as a transformative force in nearly every corner of the postbellum South. And yet, nearly all of these studies remain interested in the spectacular—the lynch mobs, the Klan, the White Leagues, the riotous mobs, and the political assassinations that marred the South in the decades after the Civil War. A third, related inclination is the tendency to prioritize either the violent actions or the perpetrators. Most lynching studies, for instance, dissect the lynch mobs, the violent murders, and the related cultural ephemera and ask how average white Southerners found themselves co-conspirators in these paroxysms of malevolence. Similarly, the Klan, the White Leagues, and other white vigilantes are castigated as the terrorists they were, but always with the caveat that they were trying to recreate a political, gender, social, economic order that falls under the rubric of “white supremacy.” The glaring weakness of this approach, quite obviously, is that victims are forever silenced because they were murdered, unable to speak for themselves. Even within lynching studies, far and away the most commonly studied form of racial violence, where historians have employed quantitative methodology since the 1930s to sort, count, and categorize nearly every aspect of mob violence, scant attention has been paid to the individual African American men and women who white Southerners murdered with such alacrity. Writing in 2015, Amy Kate Baily and Stewart E. Tolnay referred to this vacuum as the “gaping hole in the scholarship on southern lynching.”<sup>40</sup>

*One Dead Freedman* contributes to the existing scholarship on racial violence by directly addressing these two voids: a failure to examine “everyday” violence because of a fixation on the extraordinary; and, the lack of appreciation for the experience of black

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<sup>40</sup> Bailey and Tolnay, *Lynched*, 205.

victims. In short, this dissertation is the first comprehensive study of mundane racial violence in the aftermath of emancipation and the effect that said violence had on the individuals, families, and communities that were embarking on the process of becoming national citizens and full-fledged members of American society. While respectful of the power—both symbolic and real—of extraordinary violence, I argue that most black Southerners never had a direct experience with these manifestations of racial violence; rather, it was far more common for African Americans to endure violence in their daily lives, at the hands of employers, landlords, former masters, and vengeful neighbors. This violence, which one historian has dubbed “continued sporadic, almost casual violence,” was closely connected to local institutions and petty jealousies, and it emerged whenever black Southerners sought to assert the rights they believed they had rightfully earned.<sup>41</sup> From black students to laborers to upwardly-mobile African-American families, the process of establishing autonomy at the grassroots level was wracked by violence and terrorism that seriously circumscribed the lives that black Southerners were beginning to build in the infancy of widespread black freedom.

I insist on including both actualized and potential violence in my characterization of everyday violence for several reasons. Most importantly, I believe that everyday racial violence in the postbellum South was as psychologically damaging as it was physically. At the most basic level the use of violence is an act of power. Whether one uses verbal threats and abuse to harm one’s psyche, or utilizes a whip or a pistol in order to damage one’s physical body, the result can be equally as detrimental to an individual victim or community. More specific to the postbellum South was the ubiquitous nature of

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<sup>41</sup> Summers, *Ordeal of the Reunion*, 128.

everyday racial violence in the era. In short, a threat that may appear hollow and superfluous in another setting was often deadly serious in the post-emancipation South. Violence cannot be understood apart from its context. An order to leave town or await one's fate at the hands of a local posse, for example, may read like a scene from a spaghetti Western, but in the postwar South such threats carried very real consequences and a great deal of personal consternation and psychological terror for black Southerners. Finally, it should be noted that the designation of everyday racial violence is not meant to demarcate a boundary between public and private violence whereby everyday violence only occurred in private space. White Southerners often committed acts of everyday violence in public places, such as an assault on a city street, where both black and white witnesses were present.<sup>42</sup>

Shifting our attention away from grisly, macabre scenes and onto the experience of black victims emphasizes that the real story of racial violence in the post-emancipation South was not one of how many lynchings occurred in a given region, but the individual and collective response of African Americans to that violence, and its influence on

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<sup>42</sup> My use of the concept of "everyday violence" has been influenced by, but is different from, anthropological studies of subaltern peoples and their experience with violence in many different forms. Much of the existing scholarly literature on everyday violence is written from a post-colonial perspective and situates the more mundane forms of violence in the lives of peasants alongside direct political violence and structural violence, or economic oppression, caused by increasingly de-regulated global capitalism. My research shares the focus on the connections between individual experience and a macro-understanding of history, but it differs in one crucial aspect. In brief, the anthropological definition of "everyday violence" largely means violence between oppressed peoples in the same "group" that result from prior experience with political and structural violence—such as substance abuse, domestic violence, and sexual exploitation. While such violence undoubtedly existed in the postbellum South, I am focused on the more mundane forms of everyday *racial* violence perpetrated across the color line by white Southerners against black Southerners. The most complete explication of everyday violence is Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); "Peace-Time Crimes," *Social Identities*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Oct., 1997), 471-497; and "Small Wars and Invisible Genocides," *Social Sciences*, Vol. 43, No. 5 (Sept., 1996), 889-900. For a succinct comparison of everyday violence with other forms of political and structural violence, see Philippe Bourgois, "The Power of Violence in War and Peace: Post-Cold War Lessons from El Salvador," *Ethnography*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (March, 2001), 5-34.



individual lives within the black community.<sup>43</sup> More broadly, prioritizing the perspective of African American victims creates an opportunity to explore how the lived experience with violence permeated into individual black perceptions of race, racial status, and the standing of the freedmen in American society.

To do this, I employ an approach explicated in Thomas C. Holt's "Marking: Race, Race-Making, and the Writing of History." Holt argues that racial beliefs are formulated by individuals through the experiences they have on the "everyday" level and, subsequently, how they relate those experiences to larger cultural and social structures. Going one step further, Holt's understanding of the everyday was heavily influenced by the sociologist Henri LeFebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life*. LeFebvre noted that the "macro" and "micro" level of human existence are "interactive and mutually constituted, and neither take causal priority over the other." According to Holt:

Power can only be *realized* at the level of everyday ["micro"] practice, and it is dependent—ultimately and inherently—on the reproduction of the relations, idioms, and the world-view that are its means of action. In short, the everyday is where macro-level phenomena—politics, economics, ideologies—are lived.

In methodological terms, this simply means that a narrow focus on everyday minutiae is as unhelpful as a broad abstraction that purports to speak only from a global perspective. The latter approach creates "atrophied, lifeless, [and] passionless depictions" of human existence and the struggle for self-realization, while the former isolates "micro-level phenomena...[and] renders human behavior simply unknowable."<sup>44</sup> Simply put, by

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<sup>43</sup> Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me*, 9-13, 226n20.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas C. Holt, "'Marking: Race, Race-Making, and the Writing of History,'" *American Historical Review* (Feb., 1995), 10-12; Henri LeFebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume II: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday*, trans., John Moore (London: Verso, 2002 [1961]). All of the quotations are drawn from Holt. The italics in the original.

examining the actions and words of black Southerners at the grassroots level, we can uncover how working-class African Americans interpreted their economic, social, and political status and see how the supposed benefits of American citizenship clashed with the reality of everyday racial violence.

Highlighting the ordeals of victims also forces us to look to the testimony that black victims left behind and to think about the experience of Reconstruction in different ways. *One Dead Freedman* does pay close attention to the broad contours of federal policy and national developments in the postwar South, but it also juxtaposes, against this sweeping panorama, the lived experiences of individual freedpeople. Furthermore, this dissertation demands that daily life in the postbellum South be understood in light of its mundane trivialities, with all of the incumbent human foibles, and not simply as legacy of the nation's promises and failures. From this perspective, we glimpse individual black Southerners testifying about racial violence as they attempt to come to terms with the meaning of emancipation and black citizenship in a national context, but we also witness how simple actions such as going to school or laboring in a turpentine factory came to be deeply complicated by the experience with such violence. By focusing on black testimony, moreover, it is evident that African Americans connected their lived reality with these larger political and cultural happenings that were transforming postbellum America. Developments such as "emancipation" and black "citizenship" might mean the freedom to vote for one black Southerner, but another freedperson might connect these changes to promptly receiving pay for their work.<sup>45</sup> In short, while the national story of

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<sup>45</sup> Christopher Hager has noted similar distinctions in his study of literacy among enslaved persons. While acknowledging the tradition of the escaped-slave narrative, highlighted by individuals such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, Hager prioritizes the "enslaved narrative." The difference is much more substantive than semantic. According to Hager, the escaped-slave narrative was part of the abolitionist

Reconstruction may indeed be a tragedy, not all black Southerners perceived of themselves as a tragic hero, destined to fail, however bravely, for the sins of the American past. Far from it: they were too busy trying to live.

For all of its promise, the use of black testimony to uncover everyday racial violence does have some limitations. The first is its relative scarcity after the withdrawal of the Freedmen's Bureau from the South in early 1869. From the Civil War through the end of 1868, thousands of letters, complaints, affidavits, and other written documents were produced daily by African Americans, the vast majority of which are preserved in the National Archives. When the Bureau closed, working class blacks lost this vital connection to the federal government.<sup>46</sup> In many cities black newspapers continued to thrive, and a number of Congressional investigations allowed the freedmen to testify about the Klan, property they had lost, and assorted other developments, but by and large

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movement and purported to advance the cause while denouncing slavery and announcing a writer's humanity. The enslaved narrative, on the other hand, was much more concerned with the trivialities of life and was a celebration of individual accomplishment by those who had overcome so much in order to achieve literacy. Perhaps even more important, Hager also argues that literacy provided for enslaved persons and the newly emancipated an opportunity to perceive of themselves as part of the larger African American community. Thus, Hager concluded that writing, especially that which was not intended to be published, often produced self-exploration and personal growth through the process of writing. See Hager, *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013). The large majority of the African Americans who testified to the Freedmen's Bureau were not literate, normally evidenced by the signing of their name by an "x" or other mark. Still, it is likely that the process of giving testimony worked in a similar way, especially when a white representative of the federal government listened to an individual freedman and took the time to make sure that their words were faithfully recorded. Testifying, therefore, was an act that tied individual persons to the large-scale developments of Reconstruction and allowed victims to see that their ordeals as part of a larger, communal struggle against the dictates of white supremacy and white terror. For an examination of the importance of testimony in the formation of black resistance to white supremacy through World War I, see Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me*.

<sup>46</sup> One potential source of testimony may be the records of state and local courts. Laura F. Edwards' investigation of the local court structure in several counties in antebellum North Carolina has revealed that one's personal history and "credit" in a specific location sometimes provided unexpected legal opportunities. See Edwards, *The People and their Peace: Legal Culture and the Transformation of Inequality in the Post-Revolutionary South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009). Another scholar that is currently studying the experience of African Americans in state courts in the postbellum South is Melissa Milewski. See Milewski, "From Slave to Litigant: African Americans in Court in the Postwar South, 1865-1920," in *Law and History Review*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (August 2012), pp. 723-769.

the intensive documentation of the lives of average black folks was cut short when the Union government abandoned the Bureau. Another problem arises from the manner in which the documents were created. Most often, freedmen who complained about ill-treatment did so orally at the local Bureau office while a clerk or agent either recorded their testimony in full (affidavits) or summarized it as part of the tri-monthly reports that field officials sent to state headquarters every ten days. While there are certainly plenty of first-hand documents written by black Southerners in the collections of the Bureau, the bulk have at least one layer of interpretation between the testifier and the reader. In some instances, this issue is compounded by circumstance: for instance, black men often made complaints on behalf of other family members, while at other times the only extant testimony is a summary of the original made by a government clerk in a Bureau office.<sup>47</sup> Despite the concerns with these sources, their potential to reveal the influence of racial violence on the daily lives of black Southerners means that the benefits far outweigh the risks.

The utilization of the Freedmen's Bureau collections within *One Dead Freedman* also allows me to address another crucial question of Reconstruction historiography: what, exactly, was the role of the federal government—and white Northerners—in the South? Was the Union really concerned with extending civil rights and protections to

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<sup>47</sup> There is a much longer history of debate concerning the use of resources that have been collectively dubbed "slave narratives" that turns on a similar set of questions: what is authentic, and how, if at all, has the African American voice been altered by white expectations and the method of collection? The two main bodies of historical material are the narratives published by escaped slaves in the nineteenth century as part of the Abolitionist movement and the recordings made by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s. For an introduction to the historical and historiographical debates, see John Sekora, "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative," in *Callaloo*, No. 32 (Summer, 1987), pp. 482-515; Donna J. Spindel, "Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered," in *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Autumn, 1996), pp. 247-261; Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 9-11, 226-227fn24, 26.

blacks, or, did private interest, greed, and a desire to return to the prewar status quo animate the Radicals? Even the most perfunctory reading of Bureau records would quickly disabuse a twenty-first century audience of the notion that white Republicans believed in racial equality, but it would also demonstrate that most field agents served in return for a pittance compared to the terror they endured. If officials were, at times, patronizing and paternalistic, they also firmly believed that they had a duty to protect the freedpeople as best they could from white vigilantes and enforce federal law. The ground-level approach undertaken here does separate the process of governing from party intentions and the formation of national policy, but such was the messiness of applying a system of values to the unpredictable political world in which postbellum Americans found themselves.

Ultimately, I argue that the federal government, and more specifically its agents in the field, were critically important in providing black Southerners access to the formal means of citizenship whereby the freedmen might seek protection, formalize labor contracts and land deeds, and establish autonomous schools, among numerous other activities. That certain federal officials were blatantly racist, that Union soldiers often badgered and assaulted individual blacks, and that many officials did put their own material interests above the condition of the freedmen, does not overrule the basic reality that the Union, largely through the Freedmen's Bureau, sought to resist an avalanche of white terror and foster an environment in which the freedmen might prosper. The fact that the Bureau was shut down says much more about the commitment of white Southerners to daily terrorism, the normalization and acceptance of racial violence by white Americans, and the reality that a sustained military occupation would have been

required to transform the South, than it does about a failure of commitment on the part of the Bureau or individual Bureau agents.

Although racial violence did not adhere to geographic boundaries, for the purposes of clarity and consistency *One Dead Freedman* takes as its focus the states of Louisiana and Kentucky. For its role in both the national story of Reconstruction and the high-profile conflicts between Democrats and Republicans in the postbellum era, historians of racial violence have paid a great deal of attention to the Pelican State.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps more than any other Southern state, postwar Louisiana has earned a reputation as a particularly brutal place for African Americans, an ignominious distinction which is hardly diminished by an examination of everyday racial violence. As a regional hub of violent resistance to Reconstruction, furthermore, Louisiana has come to be seen, both academically and popularly, as symbolic of the Deep South and staunch white supremacy from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Movement. While it would be irresponsible and historically inaccurate to disavow the widespread reality of racial violence in postbellum Louisiana, the prevailing interpretation and focus on extraordinary violence does tend to limit our broader understanding of white terrorism within the entire South. Simply put, this view creates false a dichotomy between the Deep South as a site of grisly race riots and heinous lynchings and the Upper South as a place of benign, polite racism where blacks were oppressed but not systematically terrorized and murdered.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> For just a few recent works, see Hogue, *Uncivil War*; Wetta, *The Louisiana Scalawags: Politics, Race, and Terrorism during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012); Nystrom, *New Orleans after the Civil War*.

<sup>49</sup> George C. Wright noted this in his study of lynchings in Kentucky, although he excluded the cities of Louisville and Lexington when comparing the rest of Kentucky to the Deep South. See Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, 1.

This distinction, perpetuated for over a century, crumbles when confronted by the historical record preserved by the Freedmen's Bureau. Although less in number than the African Americans who lived in Louisiana, black Kentuckians endured racial violence every bit as brutal and sustained as the freedpeople in the Deep South. Thus, while local conditions often influenced how individual black Southerners endured racial violence, *One Dead Freedman* argues that in the realm of everyday racial violence there were far more similarities than differences—and it stresses the common experiences that freedpeople had across geographical divisions.

In addition to highlighting the parallels between the Lower and Border South, an examination of Kentucky and Louisiana also makes it possible to investigate how a number of other variables influenced the black experience with everyday racial violence. In political terms, the Republican Party established a beachhead in Louisiana during the Civil War and maintained an active organization throughout Reconstruction. In contrast, white Conservatives had returned to power in Kentucky by late 1865, and even the enfranchisement of black Kentuckians in 1870 could do little to inhibit the Democratic dominance of the Bluegrass State for the duration of Reconstruction.<sup>50</sup>

In regards to geography, Kentucky and Louisiana also allow us to glimpse how white Southerners utilized racial violence differently in urban and rural settings. Along with Freedmen's Bureau offices in cities such as New Orleans and Louisville, black newspapers also provided regular coverage of conditions facing the freedmen in the South's emergent cities. While much of the existing historiography on racial violence,

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<sup>50</sup> Although it is easy to overstate the Republican influence in Louisiana during Reconstruction, especially in areas outside of New Orleans, many African Americans were, among other things, able to cast votes and hold political office. See Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed*; Wetta; *Louisiana Scalawags*. On the comparative ineffectiveness of the Republicans in Kentucky, see Astor, *Rebels on the Border*.

specifically the Klan and other nightriding groups, has tended to separate the rural Southern countryside from the towns and cities that dotted the landscape, my analysis of the grassroots of racial violence foregrounds continuity between urban and rural locations and emphasizes that white terrorists applied pressure equally in both the backcountry and the streets of the cities such as New Orleans and Louisville.<sup>51</sup>

*One Dead Freedman* is organized both thematically and chronologically, and it examines everyday racial violence in five distinct “spaces”: military enlistment; the workplace; the household; schools; and voting stations. I have paid close attention to what each of these spaces meant to black Southerners in the first years of emancipation, and then dug into what forms or types of violence were used by white Southerners to curb the contours of black citizenship during Reconstruction. I have also emphasized that the violence that black Southerners experienced in these settings had different meanings and implications precisely because of the venue in which it was experienced. The first chapter examines the enlistment of black troops in the Union armies. Military service provided African American men with newfound geographic mobility through their participation in the Union war effort. In turn, the emancipation of soldiers and their families created the potential for immediate social mobility for black men, women, and children, especially those who were able to flee into Union refugee camps. In response, white Southerners turned to forms of violence specifically aimed at limiting the physical movement of soldiers’ families. In succession, former slave owners whipped the freedpeople to mark them as slaves and deny their emancipated status, confined them to

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<sup>51</sup> Still, it would simply be historically inaccurate to suggest that the level of racial violence in urban areas approached that of the rural South. White Southerners resorted to similar practices and evinced similar concerns in both spaces, even if the magnitude of such violence was normally quite different.



restrict their rights to move about freely, and, finally, forcibly expelled large numbers of African Americans to mock their demands for freedom by forcing movement as a means to inducing downward mobility among the freed populace.

Chapter Two places the creation of a system of free labor at the forefront of the revolutionary changes that occurred during Reconstruction. With the destruction of slavery, black Southerners envisioned a form of free labor that prioritized personal control, self-sufficiency, and economic autonomy. White employers, however, were loath to relinquish the labor control that they had exercised under slavery. In turn, whites assaulted workers who sought other jobs, whipped and expelled laborers who demanded payment of their wages, and even threatened other whites who might potentially employ their former slaves. At its core, such violence aimed to undercut freedom in the workplace and cement black dependency on white employers who hoped to control all economic power in the South.

The third chapter turns its focus to the establishment of independent black homes. Autonomous households became symbolic of black freedom and provided spaces where black families could redefine the meaning of “home” and articulate notions of black masculinity and femininity in the wake of emancipation. Recognizing the importance of the home space to black families, white terrorists assaulted these households both to police local racial boundaries and deny that black men and women had any claims to traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. By forcing men to tear down their own creations, literally emasculating them, and sexually assaulting women in their own homes, violating both their persons and their claims to protection in their households, white Southerners attempted to limit and impede true black autonomy.

Chapter Four examines the establishment of schools for the freedmen. School houses provided African Americans a tangible link to the future through the promise to improve and elevate black children through education. Black Southerners placed such an emphasis on racial advancement by means of education, in fact, that the school house and other spaces of learning came to be seen as essential to freedom. White Southerners, however, interpreted the freedmen's schools as a route to social and political equality and, eventually, integration. As a result, white Southerners threatened and assaulted both students and teachers in an effort to eliminate the means of learning. In turn, white terrorists resorted to demolishing the educational infrastructure: school houses, school books, writing utensils, and more. All told, such violence aimed at controlling whose vision of the future would come to reality in the postbellum South. Despite high levels of violence, however, it was impossible to physically stifle the desire of African Americans to educate their children because learning processes transcended space and could persist well beyond the school house.

The fifth and final chapter looks into the everyday violence of electoral politics. Although politics in the postbellum South was a broad and multi-faceted process, this chapter focuses on voting because it was the political action that gave African Americans the most direct link to the democratic process. With enfranchisement, black Southerners viewed the vote as a crucial instrument to be utilized in creating an equitable, biracial republic. For their part, white Southerners completely rejected the notion that blacks had any legitimate right to participate in the political sphere. Whites turned to widespread voter intimidation and harassment throughout election cycles, and outright assault and murder at polling places on election days. Viewed as a whole, this political violence

aimed to remove black voters from the electorate and ensure that the South would be controlled by white votes.

All of this, of course, would hardly have been lost on the average black Southerners who lived through the turbulent years of Reconstruction—many of whom are mentioned by name in the outrage registers compiled by the Freedmen’s Bureau, and many of whom are not. The common explanation that African Americans had been outraged by “parties unknown” would have been farcical were it not for the tragic consequences and lack of justice that such a characterization produced. The hermeneutics of interpreting extremely personal, everyday racial violence as anonymous and indefinable did, however, fit neatly into white suppositions that Southern violence was somehow an inevitable outcome of a black-and-white conflict where race trumped everything else. From this perspective, inexplicable racial terrorism could be assimilated into mainstream American history as part of the ongoing resolution of the Civil War and all of its incumbent arguments and controversies. Removing faces and names from perpetrators and victims, furthermore, removed the need for immediate and precipitating explanations. This was the long predicted war of the races, an all-encompassing rubric that made peculiarity an unnecessary complication. Writing from Vernon, Louisiana, in late May 1868, William Bishop, the Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Jackson Parish, reported that “a freedman was shot and killed on Friday 29<sup>th</sup> Inst in the woods about (4) miles from Vernon.” Yet again, little other information could be gathered, and the murder entered the outrage register as “one freedman” killed by “parties unknown.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Louisiana Assistant Commissioner, “Murders & Outrages from May 10/68 to Dec 15/68,” in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 34.

Stationed in Shreveport, Louisiana, in 1867 and 1868, Thomas F. Monroe reported on the eve of the 1868 presidential election that whites were patrolling neighboring parishes in order to intimidate black voters and punish any African Americans who had supposedly taken part in the murder of two white men. In the aftermath, at least one hundred black men and women were ruthlessly hunted down and killed. Almost as an afterthought, Monroe concluded his tri-monthly report of October 16, 1868, by noting that the “body of a freedman was found floating in Red River” two days prior. “A Coroner’s Jury was held, Monroe continued, “who failed to ascertain the party or cause of death, The [*sic*] body being so badly decomposed that no marks could be discovered.”<sup>53</sup> Shocking as this seems, black bodies had been washing up on river banks in Louisiana, and across the South, for decades by the era of Reconstruction—and they would continue to do so for decades more. With nothing else to go on, the clerk in the Freedman’s Bureau headquarters in New Orleans made the choice to include the probable homicide victim in the same register entry for the freedman Robert Gray who had also been murdered near Shreveport on the same day. He was given no name, and only four words: “Dead body of freedman.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Thomas F. Monroe to Lieutenant S.M. Lee, October 16, 1868, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1905, reel no. 100.

<sup>54</sup> Louisiana Assistant Commissioner, “Murders & Outrages from May 10/68 to Dec 15/68,” in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 34.

## Chapter 1 – “Their women and children were driven from their homes...”: The Everyday Violence of Military Service

By the end of March 1865, Patsey Leach had had enough. In an affidavit sworn out in Jessamine County, Kentucky, on the twenty-fifth day of the month, Leach testified that she had been in the process of becoming a free woman for nearly six months as a result of her husband’s enlistment in Company D of the 5<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Cavalry.<sup>1</sup> During that time, however, her former owner had repeatedly subjected her to brutal physical and psychological assaults that involved, among other things, recurrent whippings and continual threats against her life. According to Leach, these beatings intensified “sometime in the fall of 1864” when she had supposedly “belonged to Warren Wiley of Woodford County Ky.” and her husband, Julius, “belonged to Sarah Martin [of] Scott County Ky.” Although Leach had initially been unaware of the rationale behind the increased severity of the treatment she received from Wiley, everything became clear with the advantage of hindsight. Julius “had only been about a month in the service when he was killed...at the Salt Works Va.,” Leach claimed, and “I was living with aforesaid Wiley when he [Julius] died. He knew of my husbands enlisting before I did but never said any thing to me about it. From that time he treated me more cruelly than ever

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<sup>1</sup> Although Patsey claimed in her affidavit that she did not know exactly when Julius enlisted, the 5<sup>th</sup> U.S.C.C. formed in Kentucky during October 1864, and from overwhelming circumstantial evidence it is clear that Julius joined the regiment at that time. The emancipation of the families of Kentucky black soldiers became official in March 1865 with the issuance of General Order No. 10 by Major General John M. Palmer, although earlier reports that federal officials were offering freedom to both enlisted soldiers and their families proliferated throughout the Commonwealth as early as 1863. For an excellent overview of the raising of African American troops in Kentucky, see John David Smith, “The Recruitment of Negro Soldiers in Kentucky, 1863-1865,” *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (October, 1974), pp. 364-390.

whipping me frequently without any cause and insulting me on every occasion.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, by the end of her ordeal, Patsey Leach would understand better than most just how violent emancipation could become.

From Leach’s description of events, it was apparent that Wiley took it upon himself to terrorize his former slave as a result of his anger over Julius’ enlistment and the potential emancipation of the enslaved that would come with a Union victory in the Civil War. In Leach’s words, about three weeks after her husband joined the army, “a Company of Colored Soldiers passed our house and I was there in the garden and looked at them as they passed.” For a white man who saw his world and the entire antebellum social order on the brink of collapse, such actions prompted little but bitterness and vitriol. Warren Wiley, after all, had interacted with enslaved African Americans his entire life, and he viewed them as subordinate and inferior beings. Witnessing a column of black men proudly marching through his hometown wearing Union blue and waving the American flag, on the other hand, was rather startling.<sup>3</sup> According to Leach, “My master had been watching me” as the troops passed, “and when the soldiers had gone I went into the kitchen.” “My master followed me,” she continued, “and Knocked me to the floor saying as he did so, ‘You have been looking at them darned Nigger Soldiers.’” What Leach had thought as the men streamed by was irrelevant. If Wiley dared not take his anger out on the men carrying Springfield rifles, he did not have to look very far to find a target much closer to home whose very presence rendered unmistakably clear the

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<sup>2</sup> “Affidavit of a Kentucky Black Soldier’s Wife,” in *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867, Series II, The Black Military Experience*, eds., Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 268-269.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, “Recruitment of Negro Soldiers in Kentucky,” 389-390. On the presence of returning black soldiers as “apostles of freedom,” see Patrick Lewis, “The Democratic Partisan Militia and the Black Peril: The Kentucky Militia, Racial Violence, and the Fifteenth Amendment, 1870-73,” in *Civil War History*, Volume 56, No. 2, (June 2010), pp. 146-147.

potential of black freedom. “When I recovered my senses,” Leach testified, Wiley “beat me with a cowhide.”<sup>4</sup>

While the mere appearance of black soldiers in Woodford County had sent Wiley into paroxysms of violence, the news that Julius Leach had been killed in action sparked even more malevolence within the slaveholder. “When my husband was Killed,” Leach continued, “my master whipped me severely saying my husband had gone into the army to fight against white folks and he my master would let me know that I was foolish to let my husband go.” From this point forward, Wiley’s actions deteriorated even further:

[Wiley threatened] he would “take it out of my back,” he would “Kill me by piecemeal” and he hoped “that the last one of the nigger soldiers would be Killed” He whipped me twice after that using similar expressions. The last whipping he gave me he took me into the kitchen tied my hands tore all my clothes off until I was entirely naked, bent me down, placed my head between his Knees, then whipped me most unmercifully....The marks are still visible on my back.

In Leach’s mind, the brutal treatment that she received stemmed directly from Julius’s decision to join the Union Army. “On this and other occasions,” she concluded, “my master whipped me for no other cause than my husband having enlisted. When he had whipped me he said ‘never mind God dam you when I am done with you tomorrow you never will live no more.’” In the end, Leach claimed that she had little alternative but to flee to Union forces, as “I knew he would carry out his threats.” In late March, therefore, Leach carried her youngest child with her to Lexington, leaving four other children at Wiley’s mercy: “I want to get them but I dare not go near my master knowing he would whip me again.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Affidavit of a Kentucky Black Soldier’s Wife,” in *Freedom, Series II*, 268-269.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

As harrowing as Leach's experience was, there was little unique about it. Across the South, the families of black men who enlisted in the Union armies were tortured, harassed, and assaulted by white Southerners, largely slaveholders and their cronies, who used violence to punish African Americans who exercised personal autonomy and struck their own blows against the institution of slavery within the federal ranks. If historians have constructed an entire industry based upon answering exactly when and how the Civil War became a fight to end slavery, Americans living through the carnage provided us with more blunt assessments. For many interested—and often apoplectic—observers, it was the recruitment of black soldiers into the Union fold that signaled the end of antebellum slavery.<sup>6</sup> In the United States Congress, Representative William H. Wadsworth of Maysville, Kentucky, charged in February 1864 that administration policies threatened to revolutionize life in the South. “If they...arm the negro,” Wadsworth cautioned, “they are logically bound to recognize his freedom and equality.” Other Kentuckians agreed. Francis Dallam Peter predicted from Lexington in 1863 that blacks would not fight and that equipping them as soldiers would be a waste of time, but, nonetheless, events of the day proceeded out of his control: “I am afraid...that the negroes have got arms in their hands and...many notions of freedom in their heads.” In

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<sup>6</sup> This was certainly truer in Kentucky than Louisiana and the rest of the Confederate State of America. In fact, Lincoln had gone to great lengths throughout the early months and years of the conflict to insure white Kentuckians that their slave property would be more secure within the Union than in the Confederacy. The abrupt policy changes wrought by the Emancipation Proclamation and the subsequent recruitment of black troops in the Commonwealth beginning in 1864, therefore, angered the vast majority of the state's white residents and nearly prompted Governor Thomas E. Bramlette to attempt to steer the state out of the Union. See Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 166-247. In Louisiana, the process of black enlistment and emancipation was underway on a massive scale as early as 1862. In addition to Union forays into the Pelican State and the capture of New Orleans, the enslaved struck serious blows against the institution of slavery by fleeing from their masters and offering their assistance to the Union cause. Stephanie McCurry has argued that by 1862 Union leadership, at least in southern Louisiana, spoke of the war effort as a great slave rebellion “explicitly in terms of Saint-Domingue.” See McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 259-262.



Henderson, Kentucky, an enslaved man named Sam confirmed Peter's fears when he joined the army in August 1864. Sam "concluded to get his freedom from the future ills of life," his former owner noted, "by leaving home and joining the Negro troops."<sup>7</sup> For some African Americans it was the opportunity of a lifetime; for whites, such events foreshadowed the coming racial apocalypse.<sup>8</sup>

The connection that Sam's former owner made between "freedom" and "leaving" was instructive, as it was a link that millions of black and white Southerners recognized throughout the course of the Civil War. This chapter contends that military service provided African Americans, especially men, with new-found literal, geographic mobility through their participation in the Union war effort. In turn, the emancipation of black soldiers and their families created the potential for immediate physical and social mobility for black men, women, and children, particularly those who were able to flee into Union refugee camps and call on the federal government for protection and assistance. To stem the loss of their human property, the slaveholders resorted to forms of racial violence specifically aimed at limiting the physical movement of soldiers' families. In succession, slave owners whipped the freedpeople to mark them as enslaved and deny their emancipated status, confined and jailed them to restrict their rights to move freely, and, finally, forcibly expelled large numbers of African Americans to mock

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Smith, "Recruitment of Negro Soldiers in Kentucky," 370, 376-377, 385.

<sup>8</sup> It is tempting to narrate the story of African American military service during the Civil War in a heroic manner, and in many instances such framing is appropriate. For many blacks, however, wartime service meant pain, suffering, and disillusionment. Black troops deserted the same as white troops, and many African Americans chose not to serve in the armies at all. General studies of the United States Colored Troops, the regiments in which most African Americans saw military service, are useful, but even then an individual's personal background and ambitions could shape their wartime experience as much as the desire to free the enslaved and elevate all African Americans. See John David Smith, ed., *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Kelly D. Mezurek, *For Their Own Cause: The 27<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Troops* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2016).

black demands for freedom by throwing them out on the road or in the street, compelling movement that would induce downward mobility.

Thus, while the forms of emancipatory violence resembled, in part, the experience of the enslaved during the antebellum decades, it was nonetheless clear that racial violence in the context of the Civil War carried new implications for offenders and victims due to the potential intervention of the federal government on behalf of black Southerners.<sup>9</sup> The sheer number of black enlistments from Kentucky and Louisiana was startling. All told, the Commonwealth recruited 23,703 African American troops for the Union, more than any other state except the Pelican State, which sent 24,052 into the fray.<sup>10</sup> Accustomed to utilizing violence to coerce an enslaved population, white

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<sup>9</sup> It is always dangerous to discuss historical developments in absolutes, and the Union's role in the wartime South is no exception. While I have generally portrayed the federal armies as supportive of the freedpeople and the idea of emancipation, the lived reality was far murkier. To cite only a few general examples, many enslaved persons were returned to their former masters by bodies of soldiers, refugees were driven from refugee camps through direct orders, and individual soldiers often harassed and assaulted the freedmen in their daily interactions. Because the general thrust of the Union incursion into the South was emancipatory and contradictory to the whims of the slaveholders, however, I have devoted far more attention to these efforts. Still, the darker side of federal intervention should not be ignored, and I explore the meaning of such actions throughout this chapter.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, "Recruitment of Negro Soldiers in Kentucky," 389. The course of emancipation in Kentucky and Louisiana was decidedly different. Although the Commonwealth held onto legalized slavery until December 1865, roughly three-fourths of the state's enslaved population freed themselves during the war. By the time of the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, about 65,000 persons remained in bondage in the Bluegrass State. See Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891* (Frankfort: The Kentucky Historical Society, 2003), 178-179. While the Emancipation Proclamation did not apply to Kentucky, in theory it emancipated the enslaved in large swaths of Louisiana still under Confederate control. Furthermore, the Pelican State's 1864 constitution abolished slavery, although wartime realities meant that this measure was only partially enforced in the parishes surrounding New Orleans that were under Union control. As early as 1862, in fact, the Union had begun developing a modified system of free labor in New Orleans that would help to mobilize freedmen and refugees in support of the Union war effort. See Peter C. Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen in Civil War Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976). Writing of the careful distinction that politicians and planters made between the Union-controlled areas of Louisiana and the remainder of the state that was under Confederate control in terms of the applicability of the Emancipation Proclamation, Ripley simply noted that the "theory worked poorly in practice; for the blacks, to judge from their actions, apparently no longer considered themselves slaves." See Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen in Civil War Louisiana*, 14-39. The quote is on page 22.

Southerners perpetrated a campaign of terror against the freedmen aimed at limiting and restricting the new-found mobility that accompanied black military service.

It was hardly a given at the outset of the Civil War that the Union would participate in the destruction of slavery. Ultimately, actions undertaken by black Southerners to free themselves and journey into Union lines forced the federal government to consider the position of the freedpeople during the war strategically and develop policy accordingly. In early 1863, John Eaton, General Superintendent of Contrabands in the Department of Tennessee, sent a questionnaire to the refugee camps in his district that asked commanders to describe living conditions and the prospect of black Southerners living in freedom. Of the twenty interrogatories, Eaton posed two questions that specifically inquired as to the act of emancipation and potential service in the Union Army. As to the former, in Eaton's words: "What of the motives which induced those under your care to change their relations to their master?" Although responses varied, the commander at a camp in Corinth, Mississippi, offered a thoughtful reply that spoke to both a yearning to be free and the loathing of slavery. "Can't answer short of 100 pages," he began. "Bad treatment—hard times—lack of the comforts of life—prospect of being driven South; the more intelligent, because they wished to be free." From Memphis, Tennessee, the respondent answered with a single, eloquent sentence: the "Universal desire to obtain their freedom."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "General Superintendent of the Contrabands in the Department of the Tennessee to the Headquarters of the Department," in *Freedom, Series I, Volume III, The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South*, eds. Ira Berlin, Thavolia Glymph, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland, and Julie Saville (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1990), 684-698.

As was becoming increasingly obvious by spring 1863, moreover, the decision of African Americans to seek their freedom by running to Union lines was forcing federal policy to change in ways that would allow black men to join the Union ranks in order to secure their freedom on the battlefield.<sup>12</sup> In light of these developments, Eaton posed a simple question: “What is your opinion of the possibility of arming the negro?” “I believe in giving them their freedom by their swords,” an official from Holly Springs, Tennessee, replied. “Policy and humanity say, Arm the negro....Let them fight in the war for their own liberty.” From Memphis, the response was even more emphatic. “Yes, arm him! It will do him worlds of good.” “These men will make good soldiers,” the respondent continued. “Arm him!—for the rebels need enemies, & heaven knows the blacks have reason to be that...”<sup>13</sup> If many white soldiers still believed that the war was being fought only to preserve the Union, nearly 200,000 black men would ultimately

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<sup>12</sup> These policies, specifically the First and Second Confiscation Acts, the Militia Act, and the Emancipation Proclamation, are covered briefly in the next few paragraphs. Even then, these changes merely made official practices that many federal officials had already begun in the field. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine the intricacies and complexities of wartime emancipation in all of its varieties. Even the best general studies are limited by the matter of local developments that make overarching summations of wartime emancipation suggestive at best. To cite only one well-known example, the Emancipation Proclamation theoretically freed all the enslaved persons in Louisiana who were not living in the Union-controlled parishes around New Orleans. For the most part, military officials attempted to return runaways and potential contrabands who were the property of loyal planters, but actions undertaken by the enslaved meant that this was easier to accomplish in theory than practice. In the rest of Louisiana, however, where slavery was supposedly abolished, real emancipation accompanied the advances of the Union armies and was further assisted by the decisions the enslaved made to run into Union lines. Thus, while the situation in Louisiana looks fairly straight-forward from a policy standpoint, the wartime reality was much more complicated. Furthermore, in this chapter I will focus nearly exclusively on the enlistment of black Americans as soldiers. Of course, many black Americans were aiding the Union war effort long before they were allowed to officially enter the Union armies. The literature on wartime emancipation is vast. For an introduction to the subject, see Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, et al., *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Ira Berlin, “Who Freed the Slaves: Emancipation and Its Meaning,” in Brooks D. Simpson and David W. Blight, eds., *Union and Emancipation: Essays on Politics and Race in the Civil War Era* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1997); Eric Foner, *Nothing but Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983); Joseph T. Glatthaar, “Black Glory: The African-American Role in Union Victory,” in Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *Why the Confederacy Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> “General Superintendent of the Contrabands in the Department of the Tennessee to the Headquarters of the Department,” in *Freedom, Series I, Volume III*, 694-698.

demand by their actions, by their very presence, that emancipation be considered as well.<sup>14</sup>

Because the possibilities of military enlistment and emancipation followed closely on the heels of—and at other times potentially ahead of—Union advances, slaveholders faced the prospect of black mobilization at different times in different places. Whereas white Kentuckians did not confront widespread African American recruitment until early 1864, in Louisiana the process began much earlier as the federal government encouraged enslaved peoples to flee into Union lines through military communications and a series of executive and legislative directives that included the First and Second Confiscation Acts, the Militia Act, and the Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>15</sup> George Johnson was one of the African American men who joined the war effort at an early stage, enlisting in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Louisiana Regiment Native Guard Infantry, which formed in New Orleans in October 1862. His sacrifice did not go unnoticed by Confederate sympathizers in the Crescent City. According to an unnamed, white Unionist who wrote to Major General Nathaniel P. Banks in April 1863, Johnson’s wife, Arana, had been kidnapped from their family home at No. 90 Circus Street in late March by “four whitemen, pretending to be acting under authority of Capt. Sawyer, Provost Marshal of St. Bernard [Parish].” Apparently, several local planters believed that Johnson’s wife knew the whereabouts of a number of

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<sup>14</sup> For two widely disparate interpretations of the attitudes of white Union soldiers towards slavery, see Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers and Slavery* (New York: Knopf, 2007); Gary W. Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> The scholarship on Lincoln and the development of federal policy is voluminous. For some of the works that have influenced my thinking, see Louis S. Gerteis, *From Contraband to Freedman: Federal Policy Toward Southern Blacks, 1861-1865* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1973); Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964); Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004); Michael Vorenberg, *Final Freedom: The Civil War, the End of Slavery, and the Thirteenth Amendment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Foner, *The Fiery Trial*.

African Americans who had fled from their owner's plantations, and they tortured her in the hope of extracting information. As the men assaulted Johnson, they made repeated comments that denigrated Yankee and "Nigger" soldiers, and demanded that Johnson "give up her Ration certificate, which they called, 'Damn Yankee documents.'"<sup>16</sup> To compound matters, Union officers reported that several white Southerners appeared to have developed an alliance among themselves whereby women, such as Arana Johnson, and black children were transported to isolated plantations as part of the larger effort to harass and terrorize the black men in the Union ranks.

According to Colonel Charles W. Drew of the 4<sup>th</sup> Louisiana Regiment Native Guard Infantry, a number of local planters had established one such racket in St. Bernard Parish by early 1863. "Nearly every day," Drew claimed, "the wife of a soldier is spirited away...to that Parish." Drew had heard of one enslaved woman who had been sent by her owner from New Orleans to St. Bernard Parish where she had been whipped "very badly," and similar accounts of abuses against the relatives of soldiers poured in daily. The daughter of one of the men, Drew continued, was reported to have been "kept in the stocks a long time and then given one hundred & fifty lashes." Drew's message, written to the provost marshal general, was subsequently forwarded to Captain Silas W.

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<sup>16</sup> "Anonymous Louisiana Unionist to the Commander of the Department of the Gulf," in *Freedom, Series I, Volume III*, 432-434. Johnson's ordeal complicates the simple classifications of everyday racial violence (emancipation; labor; home place; education; and political) that provide the framework for the chapters of this dissertation. In short, Johnson endured an assault that can be categorized in a number of ways: first, white Southerners abducted Johnson and assaulted her in order to gather information about other African Americans who had achieved their own emancipation during the war; and, second, those same terrorists abducted Johnson from her home, a physical space that all Americans had imbued with a sense of familial and personal sanctuary. Thus, while I have separated everyday racial violence into five, umbrella categories, the practical experience with such violence was not as easily demarcated. For the sake of analytical clarity, I have examined the assault on Johnson here as an example of emancipatory violence—and Johnson appears again in the chapter dedicated to home place violence, where the brutal beating that she suffered is analyzed from a different perspective. This practice is repeated throughout.

Sawyer, the provost marshal of St. Bernard Parish, with the instructions to “cause the persons charged to be arrested and if guilty to be severely punished.” Finally, the provost marshal general directed Sawyer to secure Arana Johnson’s return to New Orleans.<sup>17</sup> It would be another two months before Union officials could accomplish the task.

Much of the difficulty involved in returning Arana Johnson and her children to New Orleans—and her husband—stemmed from the fact that area planters had created a carceral labor system to move enslaved peoples to areas where they could more easily be controlled during the war. Drew’s letter hinted at this reality, but the subsequent investigation revealed that planters and local police had conspired to arrest any “fugitives” in the vicinity and send them to work on a plantation in St. Bernard Parish. According to Lieutenant George H. Hanks, who traveled through the parish in April 1863, “I learned in conversation that certain members of the police of this Parish have unauthorizedly arrested Negro’es, and having subjected them to the lash, have thus coerced them into submitting to be hired out to the planters.” On one plantation, Hanks questioned a “large gang” of blacks working on a levee “and found that none of them belonged in the Parish, nearly every one was arrested and brought there, and all but one desired to return home, some of them are nearly naked and all are locked up in a brick building every night without blankets and only boards to lie on.” By the middle of May, the officers had finally worked through the maze of obstructionism and white resistance, and Hanks ordered a local planter to “Deliver to Geo Johnson U.S. Soldier his wife Arian [*sic*] Johnson and her three children.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 434.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 435-438.

From the violence directed against women like Patsey Leach and Arana Johnson, we can begin to make several observations regarding the everyday racial violence of emancipation and Union enlistment. First, it is important to note that the perpetrators and witnesses of such violence perceived the assaults, kidnappings, and beatings directed against African American women and children as symbolic attacks on the black men who had joined the Union armies. This is hardly surprising. After all, white Southerners who resided in both the Confederacy and the Union-controlled border states directly conflated military service with personal freedom—and, by extension, the freedom of their family members and all black Southerners.<sup>19</sup> When white Kentuckians and Louisianans protested the potential unlimited recruitment of black men during the Civil War, they did so on the basis that African Americans were inferior and would not make good soldiers; but, there was always an unspoken anxiety about providing the enslaved with the chance to prove their worth on the battlefield.

Few white Southerners expressed this tension more succinctly than Howell Cobb did in his January 1865 letter that spoke to the possibility of the enslaved being drafted into the Confederate armies: “If slaves will make good soldiers our whole theory of slavery is wrong but they wont make soldiers.”<sup>20</sup> Try as he—and many other white Southerners might—to reassure himself of the racial inferiority of the enslaved, Cobb

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<sup>19</sup> See Christian G. Samito, *Becoming American Under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship during the Civil War Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Paul D. Escott, *Paying Freedom's Price: A History of African Americans in the Civil War* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); Stephen Kantrowitz, *More than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), Carole Emberton, *Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South after the Civil War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 352. On Cobb's long-standing resistance to arming the enslaved for the Confederacy and the internal tensions that such discussions provoked, see Bruce Levine, *Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm Slaves during the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).



understood that black men serving in the military could only lead to the practical end of slavery. And so white Southerners in Kentucky and Louisiana raged against the enlistment of free blacks and the enslaved in both the Union and Confederate armies, clinging to the hope that what had begun as a war to preserve the institution of slavery might yet end with the tottering structure still intact.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, for all the bluster and hot air that white Southerners expended, they were unable to staunch the tide of black enlistment. As the enslaved fled to Union lines, and as the Lincoln administration's policies steadily evolved to embrace a war for emancipation, slaveholders felt themselves losing their grip more and more nearly every day. Accustomed as they were to controlling the bodies of enslaved men, these whites confronted a new reality in which they were no longer able to dictate the racial boundaries that divided the antebellum South. Even more than that, it was now apparent that African American men were playing an active role in the prosecution of a war that seemed destined to destroy American slavery forever. Thus, when slaveholders such as Warren Wiley viciously assaulted Patsey Leach, Wiley envisioned his actions as striking a blow against Julius Leach's masculinity, his patriarchal rights, and his ability to protect his immediate family.<sup>22</sup> Such violence was highly symbolic, and for white slaveholders it alleviated the despair that came from watching their designs for mastery crumble before

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<sup>21</sup> On the power of proslavery Unionism in Kentucky, see Patrick A. Lewis, *For Slavery and Union: Benjamin Buckner and Kentucky Loyalties in the Civil War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> For two recent studies that analyze the role of gender in shaping Reconstruction era racial violence, see Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship and, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008); and Emberton, *Beyond Redemption*. On masculinity in antebellum America, see Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

their eyes. In some ways, it was sadly predictable that Wiley assaulted Leach after the column of black soldiers marched through Woodford County. Upset at the prospect of black masculinity on display, Wiley viciously attacked Leach because she represented the promises of freedom and equality that came with African American men in uniform.<sup>23</sup>

Enlistment also carried other another important connotation for black and white men; namely, the literal arming with guns of African American soldiers. White Southerners, in fact, often complained most vociferously against the fact that black troops had been given weapons and that these soldiers were able to carry them into their private lives at the conclusion of the war. Like enlistment itself, gun ownership conveyed masculine rights that many white Southerners identified as a prerogative that should be denied to the enslaved and, in turn, the freedpeople. In the early years of Reconstruction, white Southerners championed the disarmament of individual black veterans as a means to better return the freedpeople to their control and limit black mobility, but such practices would have been much more difficult to enact against columns of black troops during the war.<sup>24</sup> In other words, it was out of the question for Wiley to unleash his anger on the black soldiers directly, both because they carried rifles and because the Union armies would not brook unprovoked assaults on its members by supposedly loyal citizens. Unable to strike Julius Leach or other black soldiers, Wiley substituted Patsey Leach, and whipped her unmercifully in a vain attempt to prove that he, and other

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<sup>23</sup> Although white Southerners responded with consternation to the enlistment of African American troops, in reality black Americans had served in every war since the Revolution. See Philip S. Foner, *Blacks in the American Revolution* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976); Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1961); Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999); and Gene Allen Smith, *The Slaves' Gamble: Choosing Sides in the War of 1812* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Emberton, *Beyond Redemption*, 149-152.

slaveholders, could still control black bodies and families as white Southerners had for over two centuries.<sup>25</sup>

If slaveholders saw their attacks on black women and children as an assault against black masculinity and patriarchy as represented by military service, the repercussions for individual victims were nonetheless as much physical as they were symbolic. That white Southerners interpreted the bodies of women and children as proxies for black men, in other words, did not reduce the corporeal and psychological trauma that victims such as Leach and Johnson associated with the vicious beatings. This violence against the wives and families of Union soldiers was reminiscent of thrashings that slaveholders had administered for centuries, but it was also decidedly different in the emancipatory context of African American enlistment. The difference, quite simply, was brought about by wartime realities and the gradual realization of the federal government that slavery must forever be abolished in America as one result of the great conflict.<sup>26</sup>

As white Southerners in myriad places and situations began to come to terms with this actuality, the impending presence of federal action, spurred on by millions of decisions made by the enslaved to seek freedom, ripped asunder the dichotomy of the master-slave relationship that had done much to characterize the racial violence of slavery. When slaveholders such as Warren Wiley whipped and abused enslaved people

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<sup>25</sup> On gun ownership and violence in the South, see Sally Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Dickson D. Bruce, *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979); John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South, 1800-1861* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956); James M. Denham, *A Rogue's Paradise: Crime and Punishment in Antebellum Florida, 1821-1861* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> It was the efforts of the enslaved, as much as anything else, that pushed federal officials towards emancipation as a war aim. See David Williams, *I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation during the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). For an earlier exploration of African American wartime service, see Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1953).

such as Patsey Leach in the antebellum period, it was violence meant to reinforce the legal, social, and cultural power that the master class held over the enslaved. By utilizing physical force against enslaved peoples, slave owners were doing more than attempting to control that individual's actions and make them, however impossible it might have been in practice, an extension of the master's will whereby more work would be done more efficiently. Such violence, rather, was meant to demarcate a societal group that could be assaulted—nearly at will by anyone not in that group—because they were unfree and had no claims to the legal protections of citizenship. Violence, in other words, marked the enslaved, both physically and symbolically, as undeserving and unfit.<sup>27</sup>

The prospect of enlistment and emancipation drastically altered these antebellum social dynamics. When the Union began accepting African American troops, black soldiers set in place a clear distinction between master and slave that both the enslaved and the master class immediately recognized as fundamental: by serving in the army, black Southerners had earned the right, as potential citizens, to be protected by the national government. Whether or not that protection manifested itself in practical terms was an entirely different question, but both victim and perpetrator understood the violence of emancipation in this changed environment. This realization was why Wiley berated black troops as he assaulted Patsey Leach, mocking the notion that these men, and by extension the federal government, could provide physical safety to Leach and other individuals still held in bondage.

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<sup>27</sup> On the violence of slavery and the way in which violence marked the bodies of the enslaved, see Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013). On the centrality of violence to American history, see Ned Blackhawk, *Violence Over the Land: Indians and Empire in the Early American West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, eds., *American Violence: A Documentary History* (New York: Knopf, 1970).

Enslaved peoples were also keenly aware of the transformative possibilities of federal intervention on their behalf, and black men and women based their claims to freedom and protection on their standing with the national government. Fanny Nelson was one such individual. Living in Louisville, Kentucky, in April 1867, Nelson swore out an affidavit against her former owner, George Elder, in which she claimed that Elder had kept her locked up at night after her emancipation and also destroyed a large amount of her personal property after she escaped from his residence. According to Nelson, her “husband was among the first of the colored men who enlisted in the army. That it was several months after her husband enlisted before she ascertained the fact that by orders of General Palmer she was free, she being the wife of a soldier.” Once she informed Elder that she was now free and must be paid wages or allowed to leave, “M<sup>rs</sup> Elder said upon this, that it was time enough to talk about this when Abe Lincoln said so.”<sup>28</sup>

That the direct victims of emancipatory violence were largely black women and children led to several important developments. First, during the closing months and years of the Civil War much of this violence occurred on plantations and farms that were privately controlled and beyond the reach of Union forces. While hundreds of thousands of African Americans were able to reach Union lines and achieve their freedom before the end of the war, others were not as fortunate.<sup>29</sup> As with other types of racial violence in this era, therefore, it is highly likely that black Southerners reported only a tiny percentage of these outrages to agents of the federal government, or other allies, because

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<sup>28</sup> “Affidavit of a Kentucky Freedwoman,” in *Freedom, Series I, Volume II, The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Upper South*, eds. Ira Berlin, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 710-712.

<sup>29</sup> For an overview of refugee camps during the Civil War and the evolution of Union policy throughout many areas of the South, see Chandra Manning, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2016).

they were unable to find someone to whom they could testify. When complaints were recorded, they were often made several months—or even years—after the fact, making it much harder for victims to achieve redress or to bring offenders to some semblance of justice.

As many of the affidavits cited here suggest, this was often the case with the testimony provided directly by formerly enslaved women who spoke to the violence they endured after fleeing into Union refugee camps. The issue of timing was often logistical, but it was also due to personal and familial pressures that may have made it more difficult for black women to leave the plantations and farms where they were held in bondage. More often than not, the specific concern involved whether or not to leave one's children behind when running to Union lines. The decision to potentially break up one's family in return for escaping from personal torture was a choice where both outcomes were devastating, and it is evident that many enslaved women remained with their families through severe punishment and torture. It was only after these women became convinced that they would be killed that they made the decision to run to federal lines and seek personal safety and the assistance of the army in retrieving their children.<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, the grievances that were filed immediately with Union forces or the auspices of the Freedmen's Bureau were largely made by black soldiers who complained to their superior officers. While this meant that more outrages were reported, it added several layers of interpretation between the victim's original complaint and the historical record: first, from the black woman or child to their husband or father; and,

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<sup>30</sup> On the unique status of female contrabands during the wartime South, see Thavolia Glymph, "'This Species of Property': Female Slave Contrabands in the Civil War," in Edward D.C. Campbell, Jr., and Kym S. Rice, eds., *A Woman's War: Southern Women, Civil War, and the Confederate Legacy* (Richmond: Museum of the Confederacy and the University of Virginia Press, 1996).

second, from an individual black soldier to an officer or clerk—almost always a white man—who recorded and forwarded the complaint. Despite these limitations, thousands of black Southerners were able to testify to agents of the federal government about the treatment they endured during the transition from captivity to freedom, an experience that was both transformative and incredibly violent.

The most common forms of emancipatory violence were partially derivative of the tactics slaveholders had practiced for centuries, but white Southerners also developed new methods of torture in the altered context of potential black freedom that specifically aimed to limit black mobility. From available accounts, it is clear that slaveholders most often whipped and beat black women when those women stood to gain freedom from their husband's enlistment. Slaveholders had traditionally relied on these forms of violence to coerce the enslaved, but in light of emancipation these old practices carried new significance. The practice of whipping newly freed black Southerners served to reinforce white beliefs that free African Americans could be physically controlled the same as enslaved blacks: whipping effectively marked someone's body as enslaved.<sup>31</sup> Throughout Reconstruction, in fact, black Southerners often vehemently objected to the white practice of whipping on the grounds that such practices were reminiscent of slavery.<sup>32</sup> Former slaveholders understood the connotations that whipping carried, and they liberally applied the practice to signify to black men and women that their freedom would be contested at every turn. During the Civil War, therefore, whipping became more than simply a means to control black physical mobility: it became a symbolic action

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<sup>31</sup> Kidada E. Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and "Legal Lynchings"* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 19-60.

that denied the freedmen social mobility through its close association with the violence of slavery.

The vignettes of Patsey Leach and Arana Johnson that open this chapter revealed how whippings and beatings severely limited their freedom of movement, and countless other women reported similar experiences. In Lexington, Kentucky, during June 1865, Mary Wilson testified that she had been abducted from her home twice over the course of one week and carried from the city to the residence of her former owner, William Adams, where she was whipped and beaten with a “leathern buggy trace.” The physical return of Wilson to the site of her enslavement was striking, and it was a clear indication that her former owner did not respect the mobility provided Wilson by means of her emancipation. As Wilson described the first assault, which occurred on May 31, it was clear that Adams and the men who kidnapped her were attempting to recreate the scenes of torture that dotted the Southern landscape under slavery. After the men had stripped Wilson of her clothes and tied her to “a rafter or beam” in a Slaughter house, they commenced thrashing her under Adams’ direction: “the said beating and bruising was done in pursuance of instructions from her former master who himself inflicted several stripes upon her naked body.” A week later, on June 6, the same men returned and again forced Wilson back to Adams’ farm where they “did tie her as aforesaid in a slaughter house and beat and bruised her person by inflicting blows upon her naked body with a leathern buggy trace.” While physically suggestive of the whippings that enslaved people had suffered, Adams clearly hoped to impress a new message that went beyond punishment for disregarding the master’s will: the former slaveholder had violently assaulted Wilson to demonstrate that she was not truly free to move and live where she



desired and, by tying her up in a slaughter house, implied that she was more suited to be treated like an animal than a citizen.<sup>33</sup>

From Wilson's testimony, however, it is obvious that the freedwoman rejected Adams' claim that he had the right to control her body and her physical movements by violence. In fact, she began her affidavit with a rather blunt and courageous statement of her new condition: "The affiant Mary Wilson of the County of Fayette State of Kentucky being first duly sworn states that she is the lawful wife of Lewis Wilson 119 U.S.C.I. and that under the laws of Congress she is entitled to her freedom." Quite clearly, Wilson recognized that her husband's wartime service and national political developments had permanently altered her position in American society and opened up new social and political pathways that had previously been closed. The treatment that she received from Adams existed under the slave regime simply because Wilson had no recourse; but Wilson was no longer a slave, and she demanded the protections associated with freedom and citizenship that were afforded by her husband's military service. Furthermore, Wilson confirmed that her complaints "were laid before the Military Authorities in the City of Lexington Ky. on the same day of the said first beating and bruising and that up to this time [June 17] she has been unable to have any redress for the said wrongs and outrages inflicted upon her body as aforesaid." In short, Wilson charged that Lewis Wilson's service and her emancipation entitled her, and their family, to more than theoretical claims to freedom and security—and she asserted that the second beating was a direct consequence of the failure of Union forces in Lexington to investigate her

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<sup>33</sup> "Affidavit of a Kentucky Black Soldier's Wife," in *Freedom, Series I, Volume I, The Destruction of Slavery*, ed. Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 623-624.

complaint. Aware that her rights had been trampled on, Wilson undertook another journey and traveled to Camp Nelson, Kentucky, where she further pressed her claim that the federal government had the duty to protect her as a free woman.<sup>34</sup>

Clarissa Burdett was another freedwoman who complained to federal authorities at Camp Nelson in early 1865 that her former owner had brutally whipped her as a result of her husband's enlistment and the black man's decision to leave his home in support of the Union cause. In an affidavit sworn out on March 27, Burdett described a series of assaults since her husband, Elijah Burdett, had joined the army. "I and my children belonged to Smith Alford Garrard County Ky.," Burdett testified. "When my husband enlisted my master beat me over the head with an axe handle saying as he did so that he beat me for letting Ely Burdett go off."<sup>35</sup> Quite clearly, Smith Alford resented Elijah Burdett's freedom of movement, and, lacking the ability to control the soldier's person, Smith beat Clarissa Burdett in her husband's stead.

The incident that had caused Clarissa Burdett to flee to Camp Nelson, however, had occurred just a week earlier after Burdett's "niece who lived with me went to Camp Nelson. This made my master very angry." The consequences of black military service for Smith Alford, suddenly, had become even more complex: not only had he lost Elijah Burdett to the Union ranks, but the refugee camp at Camp Nelson now provided black women and children with a destination to which they might run and seek federal protection. If Burdett could not get the girl to return the next day, Alford threatened, "he

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Although Clarissa Burdett did not specify when Elijah enlisted, the 12<sup>th</sup> Regiment, United States Colored Heavy Artillery, organized at Camp Nelson during July 1864. Elijah joined Company H, and was mustered out in April 1866. See the *Civil War Soldiers and Sailors Database* that is supported by the National Park Service. Accessed March 7, 2017. <<https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-soldiers-detail.htm?soldierId=BB160089-DC7A-DF11-BF36-B8AC6F5D926A>>.

would give me two hundred lashes.” When Burdett’s niece did not return, the slaveholder made good on his threats:

On Wednesday last March 22” he said that he had not time to beat on me on Tuesday but now he had time and he would give it to me. He then tied my hands threw the rope over a joist stripped me entirely naked and gave me about three hundred lashes. I cried out. He then caught me by the throat and almost choked me then continued to lash me...

Despite the brutality of the assault, Alford’s malevolence was not diminished. “After he whipped me on Wednesday last,” Burdett continued, “he said he would give me until next morning to bring the girl back, and if I did not get her back by that time he would give me as much more. I knew that I would be whipped so I ran away.” Leaving her children behind, Burdett made the lonely journey to Camp Nelson and implored the federal officials to protect her from a vindictive master and secure her family’s freedom.<sup>36</sup>

Like Mary Wilson, Burdett identified herself as a soldier’s wife at the beginning of her testimony, stating unequivocally her right to freedom and protection. “I am a married woman and have four children,” Burdett attested. “My husband Elijah Burdett is a soldier in the 12” U.S.C.H. Arty.” Going further, Burdett also directly associated the Union encampment at Camp Nelson with the prospect of emancipation, and her master’s actions with slavery and the Confederacy. According to Burdett, Alford repeatedly threatened the enslaved that they would be punished if they attempted to visit Camp Nelson, and “My master frequently said that he would be jailed before one of his niggers would go to Camp.” To Burdett, Alford’s words reinforced the link between the Union army, the federal government, black mobility, and emancipation—and, conversely, the

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<sup>36</sup> “Affidavit of a Kentucky Black Soldier’s Wife,” in *Freedom, Series I, Volume I*, 615-616.

relationship between the Confederate push for independence and the continued confinement and enslavement of African Americans. In fact, Alford had gone so far as to take Burdett and several family members into Confederate states during the war in order to better secure his human property. Here was the calculus of black mobility and freedom employed in reverse: by taking these enslaved peoples further from the auspices of Union power, Alford would make it nearly impossible for them to achieve their personal independence with their feet. “My master was a very cruel man and strongly sympathizes with the rebels,” Burdett testified. “He went with the Rebel General Bragg when the latter retreated from the State.”<sup>37</sup> When Alford left Kentucky, “He took me and my children to Beans Station [Tennessee] and send the parents and two sisters of my niece to Knoxville where he sold them.” Back in the Commonwealth by early 1865, Alford’s resentment of federal power continued unabated, and he whipped Burdett viciously as a result of the emancipation of several family members.<sup>38</sup>

That both Mary Wilson and Clarissa Burdett swore out their affidavits at Camp Nelson speaks clearly to the crucial role of the federal government in helping the enslaved free themselves, and hints at the complexity of wartime emancipation. Camp Nelson, originally established as a Union supply depot in 1863, became a refugee camp during the latter stages of the Civil War as many of the roughly 10,000 African American soldiers that were recruited and trained at the encampment often brought their families with them in order to escape vindictive former masters and the likely ill-treatment that

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<sup>37</sup> General Braxton Bragg’s invasion of Kentucky ended with his army’s retreat in October 1862 after the Battle of Perryville. For some excellent insight into the connections between the movement of the Union and Confederate armies and the process of emancipation in Kentucky, see Aaron Astor, *Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012); Victor B. Howard, “The Civil War in Kentucky: The Slave Claims His Freedom,” in *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (Autumn, 1982), pp. 245-256.

<sup>38</sup> “Affidavit of a Kentucky Black Soldier’s Wife,” in *Freedom, Series I, Volume I*, 615-616.

women and children would receive if left behind on plantations and farms. In addition, many blacks, such as Clarissa Burdett and her niece, were able to travel to Camp Nelson on their own to seek Union assistance in their efforts to achieve freedom. Simply put, the Union presence at Camp Nelson became a lifeline that thousands of black Kentuckians latched onto to forever change the relationship between themselves and their former owners.<sup>39</sup>

If the Union helped make emancipation possible, however, it was nonetheless a chaotic and uneven process. Several thousand former slaves who had escaped into Union lines and labeled “contrabands” of war were forced to build Camp Nelson, for instance, and it would not be until the summer of 1864 that Kentucky enlisted large numbers of African American soldiers. As a loyal border state, furthermore, Kentucky’s enslaved population was not subject to the Emancipation Proclamation, and slave owners continued to exercise as much control as they could maintain over the enslaved until the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in December 1865.<sup>40</sup>

It is important, however, to make a distinction between the overall thrust of federal policy throughout the war, and individual actions or episodes in which the Union helped to reinforce the structure of the slave regime to the obvious detriment of the enslaved who sought military assistance. In Kentucky and the Union parishes around New Orleans, army officials were at pains, especially in the early years of the war, to accept as contrabands only the enslaved property of disloyal planters. The efforts of the

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<sup>39</sup> For an overview of the importance of Camp Nelson that also serves as a collection of primary resources about the refugee camp, see Richard D. Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky: A Civil War History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002).

<sup>40</sup> On the potential for hardship and suffering among the refugee population at Camp Nelson, see Amy Murrell Taylor, “How a Cold Snap in Kentucky Led to Freedom for Thousands: An Environmental Story of Emancipation,” in Stephen W. Berry, ed., *Weirding the War: Stories from the Civil War’s Ragged Edges* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

enslaved to free themselves meant that it was impossible to rigidly enforce such a policy, but in some crucial instances the Union turned its back on the freedmen. In May 1862, for instance, General Benjamin Butler excluded from Union lines in Louisiana all the “fugitives” who were not employed by the military, “leaving them subject to the ordinary laws of the community.” In the Department of the Gulf, throughout the summer of 1862, in fact, all of the runaways who could not be employed were excluded from Union lines. The cost for the enslaved was enormous: “hundreds of escapees were returned to bondage by Butler’s policy.”<sup>41</sup>

In Kentucky, civilian officials were more likely to be involved in returning runaways to slavery through traditional channels that had been established throughout the antebellum period, but the Union was undoubtedly aware of such efforts. In January 1863, the Chief of Police in Louisville wrote to the Provost Marshal of the city and informed the federal officer how runaways were arrested and jailed in order to secure their return: “In every instance the owner is written to, immediately. This course has very generally been persued [*sic*] and many have been returned to their owners by this plan.” Lincoln’s decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, however, had caused the Chief of Police some consternation. There “being quite a number [of enslaved persons] turned loose recently,” he concluded, “I thought it advisable to get your opinion as to the disposition to be made of them hereafter.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen in Civil War Louisiana*, 14-39. Butler’s decision was influenced by political concerns, but he also feared that Louisiana’s economy would collapse without the work done by enslaved persons.

<sup>42</sup> “Chief of Police of Louisville, Kentucky, to the Provost Marshal at Louisville,” in *Freedom, Series I, Volume I*, 565-566.

Although the reality of black enlistment and the extension of freedom to soldiers' families drastically altered the calculus of returning a refugee to slavery as the war progressed, individual acts of violence were committed by Union soldiers. Writing in October 1865, an anonymous black soldier from Kentucky charged that his regiment's officers were stealing money from the African American troops and cheating them out of furloughs and rations instead of educating them. According to the soldier, the white officers were "taken our rations and Selling them and are Keeping the money. i think it is mighty hard for us to Stand that after just coming from under bondage," he continued, "there are men that has never had the chance to learn anything [and] they will give them change for a one dollar for a fifty dollar in Stead of teaching them better." Clearly connecting the white officer's conduct with that of the slaveholders, this anonymous soldier also resented that Union officials would not allow the black troops to visit with their wives in camp. They "are not allowed to come in camp," he concluded, "and we are not allowed to go and see them they are drumed off[f] and the officer Says go you damed bitches."<sup>43</sup>

On other occasions Union soldiers even attacked black children. Late in the war, the principal from a freedmen's school in Houma, Louisiana, complained to E.W. Wheelock that her pupils were physically assaulted on their way to and from school. If "it was by Rebels I would not say anything about it," the administrator lamented, "But it is by the Union pickets." When the children passed by the troops in order to get to the school, "dogs are set after them and they tear all the children's clothes."<sup>44</sup> For this

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<sup>43</sup> "Anonymous Kentucky Black Soldier to the Secretary of War," *Freedom, Series II*, 425-426.

<sup>44</sup> E.W. Wheelock to Chaplain Mark, April 25, [1864 or 1865], in Records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Louisiana, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1864-1869, Record Group 105, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, National Archives Microfilm

educator and her students, like the anonymous soldier, such actions were incompatible with the image of the Union as an army of liberation.

These larger political developments and individual incidents of violence notwithstanding, the Union, in general, served as a crucial ally in the wartime process of emancipation. As hundreds of thousands of black Southerners realized, the mobility that they latched onto through military service was twofold. For black men, especially, their participation in the Union armies gave them a great deal of literal, geographic freedom that allowed them to remove themselves from the confines of the plantation or the watchful eye of their former masters. Black women and children were also able to flee into refugee camps and the Union lines throughout the war. Perhaps just as important as corporeal movement, however, was the social mobility that military service provided black soldiers and their families. Just as service in the Union army tied physical movement to black liberation, changing federal policy linked an individual's evolving personal status with newly won rights that the Union was bound to protect. It was no mere coincidence that women such as Clarissa Burdett and Mary Wilson specifically testified that they were the wives of Union soldiers. It was this relationship, after all, that connected the two black women to the Union and permanently elevated them out of the realm of slavery and into freedom—or at least something approaching it. As the war progressed, and the social and political definition of the freedpeople's place in America became clearer, the transformation from enslaved person to contraband to refugee to

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Publication M1026 (hereafter cited as Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1026), reel no. 1. This is a press copy of Wheelock's original letter, and there is no year included. From the document's location in the collection and its content, it is fairly apparent that it is from either 1864 or 1865.



freedman represented a meteoric rise up the social ladder.<sup>45</sup> Such mobility, at least for black Americans in the nineteenth century, was unprecedented.

Still, movement towards liberation was often uneven and convoluted. In Louisiana, for instance, the Union army established contraband camps and aided in the development of a plantation-lease system, but they also began recruiting African American men in some portions of the state during the spring of 1863—over a year before enlistments began in earnest in Kentucky. Consider the case of northeastern Louisiana in the summer and spring of 1863 as the Army of the Tennessee advanced down the Mississippi River. In many instances, of course, white slaveholders simply removed their human property from the immediate vicinity and traveled into central Louisiana or locations further afoot to avoid losing their slaves. Still, thousands of black Louisianans were able to force the Union's hand by fleeing into military lines. Federal officials, in return, established "contraband camps" in order to feed and clothe these individuals. Unable to indefinitely supply the contraband camps, and since Grant and his army were preparing to leave and march on Vicksburg, officers returned the freedmen to area plantations that had been leased to white Northerners by the federal government where the formerly enslaved were required to work for wages and provide for themselves.<sup>46</sup> It would not be long, however, before many of the newly enlisted men would prove their valor on the field of battle at Milliken's Bend, Louisiana, on June 7,

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<sup>45</sup> Peter Ripley has emphasized that the freedmen interpreted the Union army as a liberating force, and that, in turn, the decision to flee into Union lines forced the federal government's hand. In terms of federal advances and raids into Confederate occupied Louisiana, Ripley noted that they "were a vehicle for freedom for thousands of bondsmen who wished to leave the plantation, and the freedmen in turn became an integral part of the forces of liberation. For those who did not leave, slavery would never be the same again." See Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen in Civil War Louisiana*, 21.

<sup>46</sup> Lawrence N. Powell, *New Masters: Northern Planters during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

1863.<sup>47</sup> Across the South, these situations repeated themselves countless times in different detail, but the presence of the federal government through the Union Army was of paramount importance to the physical and social mobility of the enslaved who sought their freedom.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to whipping, another common form of emancipatory violence that directly limited black mobility was the locking-up, or chaining of, African American bodies. As enslaved peoples continued to seek their freedom during the closing years of the war and into the early postbellum period, slaveholders turned to forcibly restraining their human property in a desperate attempt to prevent their emancipation. On the one hand, this particular type of violence was another carryover from the days of slavery, as slaveholders often tortured the enslaved with chains and other devices—and national legislation concerning the ability of slave owners to return individuals who had escaped had played an integral role in the sectional crisis that led to the Civil War.<sup>49</sup>

Still, it was not common for slaveholders physically to incarcerate or chain the enslaved every night; rather, the racialized nature of American slavery, whereby white people assumed that any black person was enslaved, created a carceral landscape that

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<sup>47</sup> On the importance of Milliken's Bend in Grant's Vicksburg campaign and its place in the larger memory of the Civil War, see Linda Barnickel, *Milliken's Bend: A Civil War Battle in History and Memory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013).

<sup>48</sup> The Port Royal Experiment is probably the most well-known example of large-scale collaboration between the Union army and a group of freedmen. See Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*; Kevin Dougherty, *The Port Royal Experiment: A Case Study in Development* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014); Akiko Ochiai, "The Port Royal Experiment Revisited: Northern Visions of Reconstruction and the Land Question," in *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (Mar., 2001), pp. 94-117.

<sup>49</sup> Edward E. Baptist has convincingly demonstrated that slaveholders used various methods of torture in order to speed labor production, and also to humiliate and emasculate enslaved men. See Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 111-144, 261-265.

rendered individual locks somewhat unnecessary.<sup>50</sup> The prospect of emancipation and the recruitment of black soldiers completely shattered these assumptions, however, and slaveholders were confronted with the reality of dwindling slave populations as thousands of individuals simply walked away from plantations and secured their freedom with their feet.<sup>51</sup> To ensure that the wives and families of black soldiers would not flee to Union installations such as Camp Nelson, slave owners found it obligatory to restrain these black Southerners under lock-and-key or risk losing them forever. For these African Americans so treated, the implications of these new actions were enormous: before the war, centuries of social, cultural, political, and legal tradition had bound the enslaved to the master class and individual owners; with emancipation, African Americans might free themselves by springing a single lock.

Fanny Nelson, mentioned briefly above, claimed that she had been locked-up by her former mistress, Mrs. George W. Elder, in the city of Louisville when Nelson first learned that she had been emancipated through her husband's enlistment in the Union army. According to Nelson, "she continued to live at the house of M<sup>r</sup> Elder until M<sup>rs</sup> Elder commenced locking her up of nights to keep her from leaving." Unwilling to submit to such treatment, Nelson "ran from the house the first good chance she got." As

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<sup>50</sup> On the idea of the "carceral landscape," see Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 209-243. For an excellent analysis of the contested meanings of space in the plantation South, see Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>51</sup> Yael A. Sternhell, *Routes of War: The World of Movement in the Confederate South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012). Sternhell argues that movement within the South initially built Confederate nationalism because citizens were able to watch parading troops on their way to war and revel in the size and vitality of the Southern armies. On the other hand, returning columns of emaciated men provided visible evidence of the faltering nation. The movement of the freedpeople was also important, and it signaled to many Confederates that their government and nation could no longer control the enslaved labor force that it had gone to war to safeguard.

a result of her illegal incarceration, however, “when she did leave (it was in the early part of the night) it was impossible to take her clothes with her except a very few.”<sup>52</sup>

Frances Johnson, “the wife of Nathan Johnson a soldier in Company F. 116<sup>th</sup> U.S.C. Infy.,” lodged a complaint in March 1865 for similar treatment in Fayette County, Kentucky. In her affidavit, Johnson alleged that the “day after my husband enlisted [in May 1864] my master knew it and said that he (my husband) and all the ‘niggers’ did mighty wrong in joining the Army.” Although Johnson continued to live on the plantation, a particularly brutal assault in early March 1865 convinced her to flee with her children. Several miles away from her destination in Lexington, however, her former owner’s son-in-law, Theophilus Bracey, accosted Johnson and her children and forced them to return to the plantation at gunpoint. “I tried to find some chance of running away but Bracy was watching me,” Johnson testified. “He took my eldest child (about seven years of age) and kept her as an Hostage. I found I could not get away from Bracey’s with my children, and determined to get away myself hoping by this means to obtain possession of them afterwards.” After two nights of being held captive, Johnson escaped into some nearby woods, and subsequently reached Lexington and the confines of Camp Nelson. Still, her children remained with Bracey: “I am anxious to have them but I am afraid to go near them knowing that Bracey would not let me have them and fearing lest he would carry out his threat to shoot me.”<sup>53</sup>

As these two cases illustrate, the act of chaining or locking up a freedwoman at night often resulted in the violent separation of young boys and girls from their mothers. Although individual black women might be able to flee to places such as Camp Nelson, it

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<sup>52</sup> “Affidavit of a Kentucky Freedwoman,” in *Freedom, Series I, Volume II*, 710-712.

<sup>53</sup> “Affidavit of a Kentucky Black Soldier’s Wife,” in *Freedom, Series II*, 694-696.

was often impossible for them to take their children along.<sup>54</sup> It is evident that the decision to flee from captivity and leave one's kids behind was a choice made only out of necessity by enslaved women in the wartime South. That African American women would leave behind children, and on many occasions several children, speaks to the difficulties that confronted black movement throughout the Civil War.

In some areas of Louisiana, Union advances meant that the enslaved population of an entire plantation might travel to refugee camps, but circumstances were different in Kentucky where loyal slaveholders were largely undisturbed by federal troops. Fanny Nelson's affidavit clearly demonstrated her desire to bring her children with her to Camp Nelson, but they had been apprehended by white men and returned to her master's plantation during their attempt to leave. Although she did not elaborate, it is likely that traveling with several children had slowed her progress and exposed the group to capture. Other concerns such as finding food and avoiding whites who might stop any African American, especially an entire family, who appeared "suspicious" and demand to know their business were also paramount. Nelson further stated that after they had been captured the first time, her children were physically kept from her, quite literally held hostage, so as to prevent her from running away. In the end, Nelson ultimately decided to make the trek to Camp Nelson on her own because she believed that the Union might be able to secure the release of her children. Many enslaved women made the same decision that Nelson did, but many others did not, choosing to remain on farms and

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<sup>54</sup> Clarissa Burdett was another freedwoman who had been forced to leave her children behind when she fled to Camp Nelson. According to her affidavit, Burdett had "four children there [at her master's home] at present and I want to get them but I cannot go there for them knowing that master who would whip me would not let any of my children go nor would he suffer me to get away." See "Affidavit of a Kentucky Black Soldier's Wife," in *Freedom, Series I, Volume I*, 615-616.

plantations and endure whatever violence might come their way. These were the impossible choices that unmitigated racial violence forced on African American women.<sup>55</sup>

Nelson and Johnson were hardly exceptional, of course, as many African American women were forced to petition federal officials in order to retrieve sons and daughters who were held as slaves after they should have been emancipated. In July 1865, Captain Alex D. Baille reported from Port Hudson, Louisiana, that he had “sent an order to a Mrs. Slaughter of Jackson” and demanded that she “show cause for retaining a colrd girl about 12 years of age from her mother (the mother being able to look after and support the child).” According to Baille, Slaughter became irate when she received the order. She “refused to give the child up,” Baille continued, “driving her away from her mother with blows and threatened her mother with violence, besides abusing the authorities which issued said order.”<sup>56</sup>

As late as October 1865, Captain James M. Fidler wrote to Brigadier General John Palmer from Lebanon, Kentucky, and denounced area slaveholders who brazenly flouted the law of March 1865 that freed the wives and children of black soldiers in the Commonwealth. According to Fidler, he was nearly powerless to prevent the returning to slavery and incarceration of entire African American families, and he could get no assistance from the civil authorities. “The presence of [federal] troops is absolutely necessary at this place,” Fidler warned, “to prevent masters from reclaiming to slavery

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<sup>55</sup> See Manning, *Troubled Refuge*; Sternhell, *Routes of War*.

<sup>56</sup> Alex D. Baille to Thomas W. Conway, July 20, 1865, in Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Louisiana, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869, Record Group 105, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, National Archives Microfilm Publication M1027 (hereafter cited as Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1027), reel no. 7.

many of the wives and children of Colored soldiers.” From Fidler’s testimony, moreover, it was apparent that former slave owners were attempting to do more than physically recoup their human property—they were retaliating against individuals who had achieved their freedom by locking them in jail and threatening a return to slavery if they dared to absent themselves from local plantations and farms. Fidler continued, “Masters threaten to return *all* slaves absent from their homes to slavery.” These outrages amounted to unjust arrests and forcible imprisonment, and few were spared: “*Two* colored children, the children of freed-women and colored soldiers, were reclaimed yesterday. I have attempted to stop these arrests, but can do nothing.”<sup>57</sup>

The incarceration of African Americans in local jails, of course, was slightly different than one individual confining another in a cabin or room, if only for the reason that jailing someone carries with it the implication that such action has been sanctioned by a municipality or state.<sup>58</sup> Still, at its core, the act of imprisonment was meant to deny black Southerners the rights of personal mobility and freedom that came with emancipation. Former slaveholders’ penchant for detaining black Southerners was so strong, in fact, that at times local officials jailed returning black veterans intent on freeing their families. In October 1865, Sergeant Thomas McDougal of “Co. “F” 107<sup>th</sup> U.S.C.I....received a Furlough of thirty days...to visit his family in Ky.” “After reaching Louisville Ky. Serg’t M<sup>c</sup>Dougal got an order from Gen’l Palmer,—in charge of the

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<sup>57</sup> “Provost Marshal of the 4<sup>th</sup> District of Kentucky to the Commander of the Department of Kentucky,” in *Freedom, Series I, Volume II*, 717-718.

<sup>58</sup> The incarceration of African American men in the South would become extremely commonplace in the decades following the Civil War. See Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); David M. Oshinsky, “*Worse than Slavery*”: *Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

Freedmen's Bureau of Kentucky,—to move his family to Louisville.” According to F.B. Clark, a commanding officer in the regiment, McDougal's wife, Hilary Johnson, was then living in Larue County and retained by her former master, a local judge and “old rebel” of some note. “Serg't M<sup>c</sup>Dougal was arrested...soon after reaching Hodgenville,” Clark continued, “his order taken from him and he lodged in the County jail, where he has been confined since October 24<sup>th</sup> 1865, on account of trying to free his family from bondage.”<sup>59</sup> Although it was an altogether different prospect to incarcerate a returning black soldier with direct orders from a Union officer than a freedwoman and her children, white Southerners bent on deforming emancipation and preventing black mobility would stop at little to achieve their ends.

White fears of black mobility and military enlistment in Kentucky also led to the mass arrest and imprisonment of alleged runaways throughout the war years. In January 1863, Chase L. Stancliff, Louisville's Chief of Police, bemoaned the fact that so many unattached blacks were “found running at large in the City” that the “Jail has been full for several months and the County Court has made no further provision for them.”<sup>60</sup> According to a Unionist in the Commonwealth, the “runaways” had actually been brought to Kentucky as servants by Confederate officers during the invasion of the state in 1862. “When Bragg retreated,” however, “many of the slaves left, hoping to find protection among the Union party. The would be rebels among us to make money arrested them as runaways and put them in our Jails under state authority. The reward for

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<sup>59</sup> “Company Officer in a Kentucky Black Regiment to the Headquarters of the Regiment,” in *Freedom, Series II*, 750-751.

<sup>60</sup> “Chief of Police of Louisville, Kentucky, to the Provost Marshal at Louisville,” in *Freedom, Series I, Volume I*, 565-566.



each is large.”<sup>61</sup> While it was unclear if the African American men intended to enlist in the Union ranks, white Kentuckians would not take that chance.

While the civil authorities often claimed to be upholding the Fugitive Slave Act in these instances, on other occasions freedpeople with freedom papers were arrested in cities such as Louisville and simply sold to the highest bidder. In August 1865, Amy Moore, a freedwoman from Alabama, testified that she had been liberated by Union soldiers near Huntsville in the summer of 1862 and carried by the army to Nashville, Tennessee. Once there, she, alongside her mother and sisters, was placed on a Union transport bound for Cincinnati, Ohio. During a stop in Louisville, however, they “were arrested by a man who said he was a watchman and taken to the Slave pen on Second Street Louisville Ky and kept there two or three days.” Shortly thereafter, another watchman transported Amy’s family to Shepherdsville, Kentucky, “and kept us confined several weeks when we were sold at auction by the Sheriff of Bullett County Ky.” in April 1863. According to Moore, “she and her mother and Sisters” had “been held as Slaves Since the above Sale and Still continue to be so held.” Like so many other black Southerners, Amy Moore’s relationship with the federal government was complicated. Although her family had been freed by the advance of Union armies, their subsequent sale back into slavery had come about because of the military’s failure to escort them to safety. Still, Moore recognized that the Union represented an important ally in her family’s quest to obtain freedom. “I have the honor to...ask the assistance of the military authorities in procuring my own and my mothers and Sisters Freedom Papers under the Presidents Proclamation of Sept. 22<sup>nd</sup> 1862,” Moore directed. “We claim protection

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<sup>61</sup> “Kentucky Unionist to the Secretary of State”, in *Freedom, Series I, Volume I*, 565.

under that Proclamation from the fact of our living in one of the States mentioned in Said Proclamation.”<sup>62</sup>

Try as they might, however, white Southerners ultimately found that they could not truly reign in the black mobility that had been unleashed by African American military service. The simple logistics of black wartime movement would have been unfathomable under the slave regime. Black men had marched off, on their own volition, to the Union lines—and then they had been recruited by the army and given guns that they carried into battle. Black women and children, where possible, literally ran away from their masters and into refugee camps to seek Union protection and assistance. At other times, black men returned from the front lines to free their families from recalcitrant whites, while black refugees from other Southern states poured into cities such as Louisville where they were legally free.

The attempt by white Southerners to chain, confine, and jail the freedpeople stemmed from a deep-seated fear of black mobility, but, at the same time, it was also a reaction to just how transformational the experience in the military had been for large swaths of the South’s black population. Witnessing supposedly “unattached,” free black people moving along country roads and city streets was a complete reversal of antebellum practice, and, to many, it was stunning evidence of the impending collapse of the entire institution of slavery.<sup>63</sup> If hundreds of thousands of black people were able to walk, run, and roam free, how would whites know who was enslaved and who was not?

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<sup>62</sup> “Former Alabama Slave to the Freedmen’s Bureau Superintendent of the Subdistrict of Louisville, Enclosing the Former Slave’s Affidavit,” in *Freedom, Series I, Volume I*, 566-568.

<sup>63</sup> Sternhell, *Routes of War*. The increased movement of the freedmen in the later years of the war, Sternhell argues, was conclusive evidence to many white Southerners that their attempt at independent nationhood premised on racial slavery had been a failure.

It would have been absurd to believe that white Southerners could jail or detain every mobile black Southerner during the Civil War, but that was exactly the conundrum presented whites by black military service. Unable, in the end, to completely control black movement through physical restraint, the slaveholders turned to a final form of violence that intended to mock the very notion of black freedom.

If whipping, chaining, and jailing black Southerners recalled centuries of racial violence committed under the slave regime, the third type of emancipatory violence that emerged during the Civil War and its aftermath was something entirely new: evicting, or driving away, potentially emancipated individuals and families. Whatever slave owners might later claim, they forcibly expelled freedpeople from plantations, slave cabins, and others homes as a means to threaten and torture black men in the Union ranks while punishing the women and children who stayed behind. In certain areas of Louisiana and other locations under federal control, African American soldiers consistently complained to their superior officers that their loved ones were cast into the street or violently evicted over the failure to pay rent—despite direct orders from Union officials that forbade such practices. At other times, former slaveholders simply notified women and children that they had been emancipated through their husband's military service and that they would have to leave the plantation or farm immediately and provide for themselves. If slave owners hoped to retain plausible deniability, the reality of the situation was that African American families were violently evicted, often cheated out of whatever property they had managed to accrue during their enslavement, and left to die.<sup>64</sup> At its core, this

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<sup>64</sup> On the importance of property to the enslaved and, later, the freedpeople, see Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003). Penningroth demonstrates that property ownership became a way in which the enslaved gave meaning to the family structure in the antebellum South.

particular form of racial violence was meant to mock notions of black freedom and liberty by initiating unwanted movement that would induce downward mobility. If things went according to the slaveholders' plan, individual freedmen would voluntarily return to white control after realizing that freedom had also provided them the opportunity to fail.

Although African Americans would completely disprove white assumptions that black people were incapable of living and thriving under freedom, forced evictions during the Civil War and its immediate aftermath had serious consequences for the men, women, and children who suddenly found themselves thus expelled. In some instances, slaveholders simply refused to support or pay wages to the family members of black soldiers, driving them away from their farms and into Union camps or depots. Writing in August 1865 to complain that his men had not been paid for nearly a year, Colonel H.W. Barry of the 8<sup>th</sup> U.S.C. Heavy Artillery declared that a "very large number of the men have families now residing in Paducah Ky. dependent upon them for support." The root of the problem, Barry continued, stemmed from the fact that the soldiers, who were formerly enslaved, had been recruited "at a time when the sentiment in Kentucky was bitterly opposed to the arming of colored troops." Rather than submit to the loss of their human property or admit the right of black Kentuckians to join the Union war effort, area slaveholders had forcibly evicted numerous families and left them to fend for themselves.

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Because the black "family" was very fluid under the institution of slavery, Penningroth claims that the enslaved developed kinship networks in which members could lay claim to the property accumulated by the group. After emancipation, however, black families transitioned towards a more male-dominated household and traditional American conceptions of property ownership. Still, the transition was hardly smooth in the years following the Civil War. As Penningroth shows, the Federal Claims Commission, tasked in the early 1870s to reimburse loyal Southerners who had their property requisitioned by the Union armies, had some difficulty in adopting their preconceived notions of property ownership to the reality of the kinship networks created by the enslaved. While the commission intended to deal with individual males who could single-handedly lay claim to property, they had to integrate more traditional forms of property ownership that could be vouched for by individuals in the community rather than legal contracts.

“Their women and children were driven from their homes,” Barry wrote, “and followed their husbands to the recruiting depot at Paducah Ky. and thereforth became dependent upon the wages of the husband and the soldier to supply them with the necessaries of life.”<sup>65</sup> Having asked so much of the soldiers, Barry demanded that the federal government fulfill its obligations and pay the men so that they might provide for their families.

Countless individual soldiers related similar experiences whereby former masters threatened and expelled women and children as a result of their enlistment. In an affidavit sworn out during November 1864, Joseph Miller explained how he and his family had come to Camp Nelson the previous month. “I was a slave of George Miller of Lincoln County Ky.,” he began. “I have always resided in Kentucky and am now a Soldier in the service of the United States. I belong to Company I 124 U.S.C. Inft now Stationed at Camp Nelson Ky.” When Miller enlisted, however, he felt compelled to bring his wife and children with him “because my master said that if I enlisted he would not maintain them and I knew they would be abused by him when I left.”<sup>66</sup> Other men in the 124<sup>th</sup> U.S.C.T stationed at Camp Nelson reported analogous treatment from former masters and detailed forced evictions across the state. “I am a soldier in the service of the United States,” John Higgins claimed, and “I belong to Company ‘I’ 124 Regt. U.S.C. Infty. When I [*came*] to Camp for the purpose of enlisting, my wife and two children came with me. This was in the latter part of October 1864. My family had been driven out of doors by their master Moses Robbins of Lincoln County Kentucky.”<sup>67</sup> Likewise,

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<sup>65</sup> “Commander of a Kentucky Black Regiment to a Military Railroad Superintendent,” *Freedom, Series II*, 683-684.

<sup>66</sup> “Affidavit of a Kentucky Black Soldier,” in *Freedom, Series II*, 269-271.

<sup>67</sup> “Affidavit of a Kentucky Black Soldier,” in *Freedom, Series I, Volume II*, 686-687.

John Burnside, “a soldier in Company K. 124 Regt. U.S.C.T.,” proclaimed that “I am a married man. My wife and children belonged to William Royster of Garrard County Ky.” According to Burnside:

William Royster told me that my wife had been trying to ruin him for the last two years and...he would scatter them to the four winds of heaven. This was said about the last of September 1864. In consequence of this threat my family were in constant dread, and desired to find protection and employment from the Government.

Facing the possible eviction and division of his family, Burnside brought them to Camp.<sup>68</sup>

As Miller, Higgins, and Burnside made abundantly clear, they believed their decisions to join the Union Army had placed their loved ones squarely in the crosshairs of vengeful whites bent on violent retribution. The forced eviction and driving away of black families from their homes had essentially made them homeless, and for these newly enlisted soldiers the situation threw into stark relief the crucial role of the federal government in mitigating the worst effects of this forced movement. It was also clear that these men and other African Americans drew a distinction between the demand for black mobility—evident in testimony that denounced the practices of chaining and confinement—and the eviction of their families from their former homes. According to the logic of the slaveholders, expulsion was exactly what bondsmen had been demanding for decades: the formerly enslaved were now free to go and do as they pleased. Miller and the other men refused to accept such contorted reasoning. Expulsion was not emancipation; rather, it was the culmination of a process that had cheated black Kentuckians out of their livelihoods for decades. Their families were to be thrown out on

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<sup>68</sup> “Affidavit of a Kentucky Black Soldier,” in *Freedom, Series I, Volume II*, 687-688.

the street, with no material goods and almost no prospect for work in the neighborhood, and left to starve. Miller did not want his wife to remain on the plantation, and he would have rather taken care of his family than have been forced to rely on the Union for support, but the reality of his situation made that impossible.

Thus, when making these claims on the Union force at Camp Nelson, none of the three men asked that their wives and children be returned to the cabins and shacks they had occupied while enslaved. They did, however, clearly articulate the notion that black soldiers and the federal government had entered into a compact. By risking their lives for the cause, African American soldiers called for the Union to secure an emancipation that meant more than the freedom to be outraged by former slaveholders who now felt even less inclined than before—if only because masters had not wanted to destroy their capital investments—to restrain from physically assaulting and maiming the freedpeople. For soldiers like Miller, Higgins, Burnside, and tens of thousands more, this realization was revolutionary. Here, quite simply, were the seeds that blossomed into later demands for the extension of basic civil and human rights.<sup>69</sup>

The Union, however, did not always measure up to the standards that black soldiers demanded. For Joseph Miller and his family, the federal government's failure would mean nearly unimaginable tragedy. Having come to Camp Nelson with his family in the middle of October 1864, Miller "was told by the Lieut. in command to take my family into a tent within the limits of the Camp. My wife and family occupied this tent by the express permission of the aforementioned Officer," he continued, "and never

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<sup>69</sup> Samito, *Becoming American Under Fire*; Kantrowitz, *More than Freedom*. The relationship between military service and citizenship became complicated in the postbellum period because of white attitudes against black militancy. See Emberton, *Beyond Redemption*.

received any notice to leave until Tuesday November 22.” That evening, a mounted guard informed Miller’s wife that she and her children had been ordered to leave the camp and that they would have to do so immediately. Miller’s testimony is worth quoting at length:

The morning was bitter cold. It was freezing hard. I was certain that it would kill my sick child to take him out in the cold. I told the man in charge of the guard that it would be the death of my boy. I told him that my wife and children had no place to go and I told him that I was a soldier of the United States. He told me that it did not make any difference. he had orders to take all out of camp. He told my wife and family that if they did not get up into the wagon which he had he would shoot the last one of them. On being thus threatened my wife and children went into the wagon. My wife carried her sick child in her arms. When they left the tent the wind was blowing hard and cold and having had to leave much of our clothing when we left our master, my wife with her little one was poorly clad. I followed them as far as the lines.

On the night of November 23, Miller went searching for his family in the nearby town of Nicholasville, where he found them in a black meeting house. “I found my wife and children shivering with cold and famished with hunger,” he concluded. “They had not received a morsel of food during the whole day. My boy was dead.... I left my family in the Meeting house—where they still remain.” Although the order to expel the families of black soldiers from Camp Nelson would be rescinded on November 29, the damage had already been done. Of the 400 African Americans that had been forced to leave, only about 250 returned, and John G. Fee claimed that 102 of those later died as a direct result of exposure to the elements. Of those 102, three were Joseph Miller’s children, and one was his wife. They all died at Camp Nelson between December 17, 1864, and January 2, 1865. Miller himself would perish on the sixth of January.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> “Affidavit of a Kentucky Black Soldier,” in *Freedom, Series II*, 269-271. An order had been issued in July 1864 to prevent black families from entering Camp Nelson, largely in an attempt to mollify white Kentuckians who were favorable to the Union but still pro-slavery. Despite this policy, the families of black soldiers had flocked to the Union camp throughout the summer and fall. On November 22, Brigadier



While the November 1864 expulsions at Camp Nelson represented the Union at its worst, white planters continued to forcibly evict black families across the South, and into the postwar months, as long as black men remained in the ranks of the Union armies. Throughout Louisiana, former slaveholders demanded that the families of African American troops pay exorbitant monthly rents, and subsequently evicted them when they could not. In August 1865, Lieutenant Hugh P. Beach, an officer in the 10<sup>th</sup> U.S.C. Artillery stationed at Fort St. Phillip, Louisiana, wrote to Thomas W. Conway and complained that his men's families were outraged on a daily basis by returning Confederates. "One of the most frequent complaints brought to me," Beach began, "is the mistreatment of Soldiers wives, and in Some cases their ejectment for non-payment of rent by returned rebels." In addition to the inhumanity of such treatment, Beach argued that it was "contrary to Genl. Orders. No. 99. H<sup>d</sup> Qrs. Dept. of the Gulf. June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1865, which declares that the families of Soldiers in the Service of the Gov't. either on land or water, Shall not be ejected for rent past due, and no collections of rent forced until further orders." Still, it was one thing to give an order—and another to enforce it.<sup>71</sup>

In Beach's estimation, the only entity that could successfully interpose itself to mediate relations between the freedmen and returned Rebels was the federal government through the Freedmen's Bureau. Even then, the Union officer entertained no illusions that white Southerners would happily accede to Bureau demands to stop the forced

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General Speed S. Fry ordered the expulsion of 400 women and children, along with the destruction of their living quarters. Miller's ordeal and his affidavit were later published in the New York *Daily Tribune* alongside a more general discussion of the expulsions. On November 29, Brigadier General Stephen Gano Burbridge countermanded Fry's order and the refugees were allowed to return. The Reverend John G. Fee helped establish a home for the refugees at Camp Nelson in January 1865. See Aaron Sheehan-Dean, *The Civil War: The Final Year Told By Those Who Lived It* (New York: The Library of America, 2014), 486-488; Taylor, "How a Cold Snap in Kentucky Led to Freedom for Thousands."

<sup>71</sup> Lieutenant Hugh P. Beach to Thomas W. Conway, August 1, 1865, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 7.

removals of black families. The Rebels “do not intend to manifest the ‘good faith’ for which Genl. Howard hopes,” Beach continued, “but intend to take Such a course with the colored people as will oblige the interference of the agents of your Bureau.” Specifically, Beach called Conway’s attention to “a Mr. John Humphrey, who I am told is a returned rebel officer now living on Roseland Plantation, St. Charles Parish.” According to one of the soldiers in Beach’s regiment, Humphrey had “made innumerable threats and at least one attempt to put out the family of one of my Soldiers.—for non-payment of rent.” “I gave the man a furlough and he got home Just in time to find a Provost Guard at his house for the purpose of ousting his wife and children.” Given the conditions in Louisiana, however, such treatment was fairly ordinary, and Beach reckoned that “persecution is the order of the day amongst these returned rebels, against the colored race in general, and Soldiers families in particular.”<sup>72</sup>

The mobility forced onto many black families through these evictions was especially hard on black women who were isolated from their spouses. Tellingly, it was also much easier for a former slaveholder to forcibly remove a soldiers’ family while the enlisted man was away from home. Writing from Roseland Plantation in July 1865, Emily Waters reported to her husband, an enlisted man in the 10<sup>th</sup> U.S.C. Artillery, that she found herself “in a great deal of trouble” and faced the prospect of losing her home. According to Waters, John Humphrey threatened that he “is going to turn us all out on the Levee unless we pay him (8.00) Eight Dollars a month for house rent.” It was an extortionate figure, and Waters claimed that she would be entirely incapable of raising the sum in spite of her best efforts. “I get all the work I can,” she explained, “and am

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

doing the best I can to get along, but if they turn me out I dont know what I shall do.”

Still, Waters evinced no desire to remain under Humphrey’s thumb, and she believed that if her husband could obtain a furlough he might return and procure their family a stable residence. “Now I have no money of any account and I am not able to get enough to pay so much rent,” she warned her husband, “and I want you to get a furlough as soon as you can and come home and find a place for us to live in.”<sup>73</sup> For Waters, the downward mobility associated with eviction would place both herself and her children in grave danger, but the potential return of her husband, if only for a short time, offered the family a legitimate chance to establish itself in the area.

In other instances, white Southerners also destroyed the property of black families during the eviction process. In an April 1867 affidavit, Fanny Nelson, another freedwoman who gained her freedom through her husband’s enlistment, requested federal aid in retrieving over \$230 of property that had been stolen from her. According to Nelson, she owned large amounts of clothing, a bed, a bureau, six chairs, one rocking chair, and five irons in addition to several aprons, parasols, and an ironing board. Importantly, Nelson delved into the origin of these goods, narrating how her familial connections and relationships had allowed her to accumulate such a vast assortment of property.<sup>74</sup> Some of the items “she had bought herself,” Nelson began, and “some were given her by her husband but the larger portion was given her by her former mistress and owner M<sup>rs</sup> D.P. Faulds.” In Nelson’s estimation, these material items represented decades of work, pain, struggle, and personal triumph—and they had been destroyed in a matter of minutes by the Elders. In fact, Nelson’s husband had applied to the Freedmen’s

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<sup>73</sup> Emily Waters to My Dear Husband, July 16, 1865, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 7.

<sup>74</sup> On the importance of material goods to the freedpeople, see Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk*.

Bureau in early 1866 for help in obtaining her property, but over a year had passed with no resolution. To complicate matters, her former owner also swore out an affidavit in April 1867 in which he claimed that Nelson had had no property when he purchased her, and that he had never even known her to have a husband.<sup>75</sup> Whatever the exact value of Nelson's property may have been, it was obvious that violence had again been marshaled to force a freedwoman down the social ladder. The slave owner's actions insured that Nelson would have freedom, but nothing else.

If the complaints, letters, and affidavits that poured into federal camps and local Freedmen's Bureau offices by the thousands made anything clear, it was that military enlistment and the potential of emancipation had brought about a great deal of black mobility that white Southerners sought to restrict through racial terrorism. If whipping and physically restraining newly emancipated individuals recalled the violence of slavery, slaveholders also adopted new forms of terror and forcibly evicted freedpeople who were, for all intents and purposes, left to die by whites who would rather see them dead than free. And yet, after all of this, the slaveholders continued to surprise federal officials with their intransigence and unwillingness to allow black people to move freely throughout the postbellum South. Writing from Opelousas, Louisiana, in August 1865, Captain Julius S. Clarke reported a scheme by local civil officials whereby black laborers who traveled into town carrying signed passes from their employers were falsely arrested, thrown into prison, and told they must pay an exorbitant fine in order to obtain their release. In "case this cannot be done by them, then some planter is allowed to take them out, pay the bills and take the Freedman to his (another) plantation" without a labor

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<sup>75</sup> "Affidavit of a Kentucky Freedwoman," in *Freedom, Series I, Volume II*, 710-712.

contract. What was this but slavery? According to Clarke, he had “already taken the testimony” of one freedman “and can produce twenty other cases” of a similar nature. As unholy as it was, Clarke confirmed that “this is the gospel truth.”<sup>76</sup>

By the beginning of October 1865, Colonel H.N. Frisbie, Commander of the Post of Port Hudson, Louisiana, had had enough. From his vantage point, Frisbie could easily witness the abuse that area planters meted out to the freedmen on a daily basis, the cumulative effect of which was to make a mockery of the practical reality of emancipation. To make matters worse, Thomas W. Conway, Assistant Commissioner of the Freedmen’s Bureau in Louisiana, had recently directed Frisbie to treat returning black soldiers the same way that the federal government did white veterans in the North. In Frisbie’s estimation, such an edict rendered Conway and the entire Freedmen’s Bureau nothing more than a pathetic sham. If “Colored Soldiers and their families are to be treated like and expected to take care of themselves as white Soldiers and their families in the north,” Frisbie charged, “then is your Bureau a useless incumbrance [sic] and the sooner it is shut up and its agents sent home the better.” What might have been difficult for Conway to realize while stationed in New Orleans, Frisbie explained, was that “the colored Soldiers families and their friends are *totally unlike* in condition to the white Soldiers families and their friends.” Emancipation, in other words, had not transpired in a vacuum, and the common practice of evicting black families and driving them away from their homes had created a volatile and dangerous situation. If “you allow planters to turn off and shut up the cabins of these soldiers families before provisions are made for

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<sup>76</sup> Julius S. Clarke to Thomas W. Conway, August 13, 1865, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 8.

them elsewhere and especially months before any one else wants to hire them,” Frisbie wrote, “then has your Bureau utterly failed in its functions contemplated in its establishment.”<sup>77</sup>

At Port Hudson and Baton Rouge, specifically, Frisbie described the practice of forced evictions as a tactic that white planters utilized in order to revenge themselves against African American soldiers. The results were devastating. “It seems to me proper to require Planters when they have persons on their place not wanted to request their removal through the Bureau,” Frisbie cautioned. Left to their own devices, however, the former slaveholders had expelled the freedmen “at their pleasure and keep their pigs chickens and cooking utensils and leave them on the levee a week in a starving condition [as] an injustice towards the families of these soldiers.” These practices were alarmingly widespread. “It is the general purpose among the Planters to turn off very soon nearly all those upon their places,” Frisbie continued, “and yet the complaints of cruelty and injustice are so numerous that but few of them can be attended to and I hear the same state of things extends elsewhere.”<sup>78</sup>

Here, on the levees near Port Hudson and Baton Rouge, was the furthest logical extension of the racial violence that accompanied military service. As Frisbie noted, the ex-slaveholders’ reasoning was unmistakably clear: unable completely to control black soldiers and their families, the former planters had revenged themselves upon the freedpeople by forcing onto the newly emancipated an allegedly free status that, the whites hoped, would demonstrate to black women and children that they were better off

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<sup>77</sup> “Commander of the Post of Port Hudson, Louisiana, to the Louisiana Freedmen’s Bureau Assistant Commissioner and the Latter’s Reply,” in *Freedom, Series II*, 701-703.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

when dependent upon their former masters.<sup>79</sup> By giving up their freedom of movement and accepting a subordinate status, in other words, the freedpeople might realize their physical and material security under the ever-present gaze of whites. Although the Union commander did not report any direct testimony from freedmen in the area, other evidence cited in this chapter is suggestive. Despite being left for dead and nearing the point of starvation on the levees, it is highly doubtful that this group of black Louisianans internalized the message that their former masters intended. There would have likely been no clamor among the freedmen to be taken back in by the slaveholders and simply resume their old relationship. The old reality had been undone by the freedom of person and mobility that military service and Union intervention had made possible. If anything, in fact, Frisbie's revelation that the freedmen complained of "cruel" and "unjust" treatment was especially telling. According to the freedpeople, they had not been mistreated as enslaved persons who must accept their punishment and return to their master—they had been wronged as citizens who could rightly call on the federal government, through the Freedmen's Bureau, for succor and relief. This realization, no matter how one interprets it, was nothing short of a personal, social, and political revolution.

Such a marked transformation in black thinking did not occur overnight; rather, it was a slow, painful process that evolved throughout the war as military service provided hundreds of thousands of black Southerners the opportunity to accomplish their freedom through personal mobility. Nothing about emancipation was easy, however, and white

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<sup>79</sup> For an analysis of Southern politics in the postwar era that stresses the connection between dependency and personal security, see Gregory P. Downs, *Declarations of Dependence: The Long Reconstruction of Popular Politics in the South, 1861-1908* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

Southerners employed racial violence to hinder black freedom at every step of the way. Martha Cooley, a widowed freedwoman who had made her way to Camp Nelson by early 1865, described the violent stages of her own emancipation and the decision to seek federal assistance. "I am a widow woman," Cooley swore in an affidavit, "my husband Simon Cooley was a Soldier in the 5<sup>th</sup> U.S.C. Cavalry and was killed at the Salt Works during Genl Burbridge's last raid."<sup>80</sup> Still, Cooley had remained enslaved throughout the winter of and early spring of 1865: "About three weeks ago I told my master [John Nave] that I wanted to go to Camp Nelson."<sup>81</sup>

Although she did not explicitly state it in her testimony, Cooley's decision to travel to the Union encampment coincided with the publication of federal orders that emancipated the families of black troops in Kentucky, and it is nearly certain that both the enslaved woman and the slaveholder were aware of the revolutionary changes afoot. After Cooley had informed Nave of her intentions, however, Nave responded by threatening that "I will give you Camp" and "immediately took a large hickory stick with which he commenced beating me...breaking one of the bones of my left arm." Determined to leave, Cooley pressed on. "I told him I wanted my children," she continued. "He said I could neither have my children nor my clothes, My master beat me for this request. I watched my chance and ran away." Despite her successful escape,

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<sup>80</sup> General Stephen Gano Burbridge's attack on the Confederate saltworks in the town of Saltville, Virginia, occurred on October 2, 1864. In the "raid," Burbridge's forces included Simon Cooley's black cavalry regiment. A Union defeat, the battle is better known for the massacre of black and white Union prisoners on October 3, one day after the battle. One prominent historian of the Civil war has claimed that the massacre at Saltville was worse than the infamous slaughter at Fort Pillow because the murders were committed after battle had ceased and that the killings were simply perpetrated for the sake of vengeance. See William C. Davis, "The Massacre at Saltville," in *Civil War Times Illustrated*, Vol. 9, No. 10 (Feb., 1971), 4-6; Brian D. McKnight, *Contested Borderlands: The Civil War in Appalachian Kentucky and Virginia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 206-213; McKnight, *Confederate Outlaw: Champ Ferguson and the Civil War in Appalachia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011).

<sup>81</sup> "Affidavit of a Kentucky Freedwoman," in *Freedom, Series I, Volume II*, 698.



complete freedom remained just beyond her grasp: “I had to leave my children with my master. I have been in Camp about two weeks and am very anxious to get my children.”<sup>82</sup>

With just a few lines of testimony, Martha Cooley had outlined the broad contours and shifts in the racial violence of enlistment and emancipation. The widowed wife of a black soldier, Cooley was brutally assaulted when she initially informed her master of her desire to free herself by going to Camp Nelson. Unwilling to allow Cooley to travel freely, John Nave then commenced to hold Cooley’s children and possessions as hostages in the vain attempt to convince the freedwoman of her permanent dependency. As in so many other instances, however, this violence was insufficient to restrain Cooley forever, and she subsequently fled to the auspices of the Union army. With federal support, she might also reasonably expect to quickly regain her children. From Nave’s perspective, the former slaveholder had done all that he could possibly do to retain the freedwoman. He had broken her body, denied Cooley her children and earthly goods, and threatened her on a daily basis that such treatment would continue if she persisted in her efforts to leave. There was, quite literally, nothing else that Nave could do short of evicting Cooley and throwing the freedwomen into the road. The problem with such a solution, however, was obvious. That was precisely the resolution that Cooley, and millions of other black Southerners, desired: personal freedom.

In this sense, therefore, the forced ejection of freedpeople from their cabins and homes was both the ultimate expression of the racial violence of military enlistment and, at the same time, an admission that such tactics had utterly failed to limit and restrict

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

unfettered black mobility. After all, white Southerners had gone to such lengths of terror and torture in order to keep their human property on the farm and under their control—and now they were simply driving those individuals away who they could no longer regulate. In November 1865, D.S. Hays, the Freedmen’s Bureau Superintendent at Hopkinsville, Kentucky, wrote to General Clinton B. Fisk and reported that local planters were driving away African American women before the end of the year because they did not want the extra expense of providing winter clothing for the enslaved population. “I have a few besides the wives of soldiers to Come into my hands for hire,” Hays wrote, “such as have been turned off by their owners rather than to furnish them with their Winter Clothings.” In Hay’s estimation, the situation would only get worse as the year wore on: “before the 25<sup>th</sup> of December there will be many cases of that kind in our County.”<sup>83</sup> It was not a coincidence that it was largely the families of black soldiers that had been driven away from their homes—it was the finale of years of targeted violence that had, ultimately, failed to keep black Southerners in their place.

That black resistance and perseverance triumphed over unrestrained physical force to secure emancipation and black mobility was incredibly important to African Americans in the postbellum South. While some states would pass the infamous “Black Codes” and white society, in general, attempted to hem African Americans into certain jobs, neighborhoods, schools, and public accommodations in a continued effort to restrict corporeal and social mobility, emancipation and physical freedom had been accomplished forever. Without a doubt, this was one of the most significant legacies of

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<sup>83</sup> “Freedmen’s Bureau Superintendent at Hopkinsville, Kentucky, to the Freedmen’s Bureau Assistant Commissioner for Kentucky and Tennessee,” in *Freedom, Series III, Volume I, Land and Labor, 1865*, eds. Steven Hahn, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O’Donovan, John C. Rodrigue, and Leslie S. Rowland (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 725-727.

black military service and the millions of decisions that individual African Americans made to free themselves through their own exertions during the course of the Civil War. The practical enactment of that legacy, however, was never guaranteed. As daily life unfolded in the postbellum South, whites marshaled a staggering array of violent tactics to limit black freedom wherever possible. The tripartite relationship amongst the freedmen, former slaveholders, and the national government would require all three parties to undergo dramatic psychological transformations during Reconstruction that would shape the contours of life in the postbellum South. The willingness of the federal government to intervene, decisive in the context of emancipation, would waver as Reconstruction progressed. Although such hesitation would never reverse the finality of African American emancipation, they could prove catastrophic for individual blacks. The consequences of persistence, no matter the outcome, were often devastating.

Still, in the face of long odds, hope persisted. Writing to her husband, a Union soldier, in July 1865, Jane Coward described the emotional dilemma and physical torture that resulted from the daily struggle to reconcile her physical freedom with the constant threat of racial violence. “Dear Husband,” she began, “i set my self down to write you a few lines to let you know that Mr Reed [head of a neighboring black family] twoke to me and my three children to live with him to live.” Upset by this arrangement, Coward’s former owner, Frank Coward, and another white man named R.L. Moore “come hear to day and beat me nearly to death.” One of Jane’s friends, Sarah Reed, confirmed the brutality of the attack: “Coward beat hear nearly to death... and he said to jane that before she should live with me he would killer de[ad] and all of the Reeds that was on top of earth in less than one weak....R L more says that he will kill every woman that he

knows that has got a husband in the army.” In both Jane Coward and Sarah Reed’s estimation, there was little mystery as to what the ultimate effect of such violence would be. As Reed poignantly wrote, “i think we will have to leve hear [Greensburg, Kentucky] on the account of the rebels that is hear for if a man ever leaves his wife and children at home by thar selves thay are abused by some one of them.” “I have two children in the union army and we have two children that was killed in the union army,” Reed continued, “and i think that aught to have some peace at home when my husband leaves me at home.” It was a simple request. With Jane’s body nearly broken, Reed revealed that her spirit still had plenty of strength. During the violent encounter with Frank Coward and R.L. Moore, Reed claimed that Moore had insulted her by taunting that “i was no better than a negro rag and i think that i am just as good as he is.” In fact, she might have been better: “i never treated nothing as he did [Jane] to day.”<sup>84</sup> It was quite the statement of her resolve and, alongside their decision to leave the site of their physical torture, a testament to the social and personal mobility that military service had made possible.

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<sup>84</sup> “Wife of a Kentucky Black Soldier to Her Husband,” in *Freedom, Series II*, 697-698.

## Chapter 2 — “So they may not fall into this rebel trap...”: Violence and Free Labor

In September 1866, Jacob Burgest returned to New Orleans with a report that many African Americans across the post-emancipation South could relate to quite easily. A former Union soldier who had served in the 68<sup>th</sup> Regiment U.S.C.T. Infantry, Burgest had been in the Crescent City in the spring of 1866 when he became acquainted with “Captain” J.G. Colvit, a runner for a plantation owner in Rapides Parish.<sup>1</sup> After negotiating contractual terms with Colvit, Burgest convinced a number of his comrades to leave New Orleans and move to the plantation where they would work for “Government rations, including sugar, coffee, blankets, cooking utensils, two suits of clothing and whiskey daily besides the price fifteen dollars per month payable monthly.” Before they had signed a labor contract, however, Colvit duped Burgest and the others into boarding a boat bound for Rapides Parish on the premise that certain details had to be finalized on deck. Once they arrived at the plantation with no further mention of the contract, Colvit withheld pay, rations, and other supplies, fraudulently arrested and imprisoned those laborers who sought the assistance of the local agents of the Freedmen’s Bureau, and employed returned white Confederate soldiers as armed guards in order to force the laborers to stay. Finally, when Burgest complained to Colvit that the failure of the plantation owner to give the laborers a contract had convinced him to return to his native Missouri, Colvit detained Burgest in Alexandria, Louisiana, where, Burgest

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<sup>1</sup> The records of the 68<sup>th</sup> U.S.C.T., which organized in Missouri, contain the enlistment of “Jacob Burgett,” undoubtedly the same individual who submitted this report to the New Orleans *Tribune*. The text in the *Tribune* clearly reads as “Burgest.” The enlistment record can be viewed in the on-line database Missouri Digital Heritage.

explained, he was “seized by this man Colvit, and dragged, pistol in hand, before one Kilpatrick, who sent me to jail, where I was confined many weeks, covered with vermin, robbed of my clothes, and cheated out of my earnings.” While Burgest was in jail, Colvit and his associates threatened him with harsh punishments while simultaneously claiming they would be “light” on him if he consented to give false testimony against another prisoner they hoped to make money off of—something that Burgest refused to do. In the end, Burgest was finally freed after he found a local businessman willing to pay his nearly \$500 bail, as well as a number of other fees that Colvit apparently invented on the spot.<sup>2</sup>

Burgest’s ordeal in Rapides Parish would have come as no surprise to black Southerners living through the early years of Reconstruction. As thousands of African Americans would make apparent through testimony provided to agents of the Freedmen’s Bureau and other local and state officials, black workers were keenly aware that racial violence limited and deformed the system of free labor that developed in the postbellum South.<sup>3</sup> The rationale behind such rampant terrorism is easy to understand. Work had always been at the center of the master-slave relationship, and efforts by the freedmen and their Republican allies to institute free labor in the South amounted to a complete inversion of pre-war dynamics. If most whites at least begrudgingly accepted the finality

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<sup>2</sup> New Orleans *Tribune*, September 23, 1866.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 28-29, 525. According to Foner, belief in the advantages of free labor solidified the foundations of Reconstruction: “Sanctified by the North’s triumph, the free labor ideology would emerge from the war further strengthened as a definition of the good society, an underpinning of Republican party policy, and a starting point for discussions of the postwar South.”

of black freedom, far fewer would admit that African Americans should have unrestricted access to their own labor—which they then might sell to the highest bidder.<sup>4</sup>

With the destruction of slavery, black Southerners envisioned a form of free labor that prioritized personal control, self-sufficiency, and economic autonomy. This chapter contends that white employers, however, were loath to relinquish the control of labor that they had exercised under slavery. In turn, whites assaulted black workers who sought other jobs, whipped and expelled laborers who demanded payment of their wages, and even threatened other whites who might potentially employ their former slaves. At its core, such violence aimed to undercut freedom in the workplace and cement black dependency on white employers who sought to control all economic power in the postbellum South. The establishment of free labor in the postwar South is often told as a

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<sup>4</sup> The literature on the development of free labor in the South is vast and influential. For some of the works that have guided my thinking, see W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Russel & Russel, 1935); Foner, *Reconstruction*; Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Knopf, 1979); Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Joseph P. Reidy, *From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Cotton Plantation South: Central Georgia, 1800-1880* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992); John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001); Martin Ruef, *Between Slavery and Capitalism: The Legacy of Emancipation in the American South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Jennifer Hull Dorsey, *Hirelings: African American Workers and Free Labor in Early Maryland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); James Michael Rhyne, " 'The Negroes are no Longer Slaves': Free Black Families, Free Labor, and Racial Violence in Post-Emancipation Kentucky," in Bruce E. Baker and Brian Kelly, eds., *After Slavery: Race, Labor, and Citizenship in the Reconstruction South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013). Perhaps most path breaking, however, has been the work produced by the Freedmen and Southern Society Project. Of the six volumes currently published, four focus directly on the creation of free labor in the South. See *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867, Series I, Volume II, The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Upper South*, eds. Ira Berlin, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); *Freedom, Series I, Volume III, The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South*, eds. Ira Berlin, Thavolia Glymph, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland, and Julie Saville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); *Freedom, Series III, Volume I, Land and Labor, 1865*, eds. Steven Hahn, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O'Donovan, John C. Rodrigue, and Leslie S. Rowland (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008); *Freedom, Series III, Volume II, Land and Labor, 1866-1867*, eds. René Hayden, Anthony E. Kaye, Kate Masur, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O'Donovan, Leslie S. Rowland, and Stephen A. West (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

story whereby whites exerted economic leverage, devised shady contracts, and manipulated laws like apprenticeship in order to trap black people in a dependent state, but these tactics were enforced, and given effectiveness, through unbridled racial violence.

Emancipation forever altered every aspect of the freedmen's lives, of course, but few changes were more profound than the transformation from enslaved person to free laborer. Beyond the personal freedom of the formerly enslaved, the recasting of four million individuals from unprotected, unpaid laborers to American citizens with contractual rights was probably the most far-reaching transformation in the postbellum South. Whatever else being enslaved had meant, American slavery had been fundamentally concerned with the theft of African American labor and its subsequent utilization by the master class to create material wealth. Slaveholders often talked of the enslaved as their "hands," imagining them as physical extensions of their own bodies that they could control.<sup>5</sup> Freedom forever severed both the physical and imagined connections of the master-slave relationship, and black Southerners eagerly announced their desire to work and enjoy for themselves the benefits of their own labor. As vociferous as these proclamations were, the cold reality for far too many freedmen fell well short of expectations. For better or worse, work often dictates the seasons and cycles of one's life. As hundreds of thousands of black Southerners embraced the promises of free labor in the aftermath of the Civil War, they were confronted by white violence at every turn. Everyday violence in the postbellum South was both shockingly

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 152-154.



brutal and grindingly mundane, and it would accompany the aborted development of free labor through Reconstruction and beyond.

The chasm between black expectations of what free labor meant and white desires to maintain economic control of black bodies would lead to innumerable acts of racial violence in the years following the Civil War. From threats and whippings of those reluctant to follow an employer's every wish, all the way to the murder of those who attempted to take their labor elsewhere, black Southerners knew they walked a razor's edge between life and death when they exerted the right to control their own work. Ultimately, white Southerners resorted to such tactics in an effort to both recreate the master-slave dynamic within the employer-employee relationship, and prevent the anticipated apocalypse that would result from unlimited black movement and freedom of choice.

For their part, African Americans were well aware of white accusations that emancipation would lead to little but black idleness and vagrancy. Such thoughts undoubtedly struck many former slaves—the people who had worked for centuries as the master class led lives of indolence—as absurd, but nonetheless blacks repeatedly stressed their desire to labor in early Reconstruction. The First Colored Convention of Kentucky, convened at Lexington on March 22, 1866, was representative of a number of black meetings that gathered in the postwar era to demand civil equality, political rights, and the ability to control their own labor.<sup>6</sup> The delegates spoke directly to these aforementioned white allegations when they proclaimed that “FREEDOM does not mean

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<sup>6</sup> Herbert Aptheker, “South Carolina Negro Conventions, 1865” in *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Jan., 1946), pp. 91-97; Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker, eds., *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions, 1840-1865*, 2 Volumes (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979); Foner, *Reconstruction*, 110-119.

idleness, nor exemption from labor.” “We realize and accept the fact, that, we have no wealth save horny hands, no skill but what untaught nature gives us; that we must work,” the convention continued, “...to secure by manly endeavor in all honorable industrial pursuits, wealth with all its material blessings.”<sup>7</sup> In rhetoric that attempted to rebut charges of black idleness that had festered for decades among white Kentuckians, the convention delegates honored traditional American ideals such as individualism and hard work that stood at the center of free labor ideology.<sup>8</sup> In the free labor model, the ability to control one’s own labor was absolutely essential to the exercise of other civil and political rights that together comprised the fruits of American citizenship.<sup>9</sup> Having just emerged from under the lash of centuries of unrequited toil, African Americans were eager to embrace the gospel of free labor.

While black Southerners expressed their acceptance of the ideology of free labor, many questions remained regarding its practical implementation. African Americans especially resented the efforts of whites that attempted to dictate when, where, and to whom they should sell their labor. These practices, which even well-meaning Bureau officials often engaged in, were resisted because of the priority that black Southerners placed on the ability to control their own labor.<sup>10</sup> On March 17, 1865, a “mass meeting

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<sup>7</sup>*Proceedings of the First Convention of Colored Men of Kentucky, Held in Lexington, March the 22d, 23d, 24th and 26th, 1866 with the Constitution of the Kentucky State Benevolent Association* (Louisville: Civill and Calvert Printing, 1866), 22, 24.

<sup>8</sup> Heather Cox Richardson, *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). Richardson argues that middle-class Americans began to idolize notions of individualism in the aftermath of the Civil War that helped convince themselves that they did not need to receive assistance from the federal government. Ironically, these middle-class Americans who enjoyed an advantageous relationship with the American state denigrated other Americans who they saw as too desperately seeking preferential treatment from the national government: the poor and big business.

<sup>9</sup> Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

<sup>10</sup> Exactly what “free labor” meant to the freedmen and how that differed from Republican definitions is one of the central tensions in Eric Foner’s sweeping history of Reconstruction. In Foner’s words: “Yet

of the colored Citizens of New-Orleans” passed a series of resolutions that denounced federal coercion of black laborers as little more than “disguised bondage” that “does not practically differ from slavery, except by the interdiction from selling and whipping to death.” At the heart of their complaints were federal policies that pushed black Louisianans to sign labor contracts with their former masters and limited black mobility in the search for employment. According to the assembly, there was no “practical liberty for the laborers, without the right of contracting freely, and voluntarily, on the terms of labor.” Any infringement of this right, the meeting proclaimed, was tantamount to slavery: “the right of the employee to freely agree and contract, according to his best judgment, with his employer, for the term of labor, is the unquestionable attribute of every freeman.” Finally, as friends of “freedom, equal rights, and liberty,” the resolutions concluded by entering “our protest against every restriction put on the traveling facilities on account of color.” Such treatment at the hands of the Union, the delegates took as evidence that the federal government simply intended to recreate the labor dynamics that had existed under the slave regime.<sup>11</sup>

For federal officials, it was difficult to reconcile the ideology of free labor echoed by black conventions with conditions on the ground in the South. In response to the resolutions of the New Orleans mass meeting, Major General S.A. Hurlbut excoriated the “Free Colored People of New Orleans, free by the Old Laws of the State, and some at

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freedom meant more than simply receiving wages. Freedmen wished to take control of the conditions under which they labored, free themselves from subordination to white authority, and carve out the greatest measure of economic autonomy.” “The desire to escape from white supervision and establish a modicum of economic independence,” Foner continued later, “profoundly shaped blacks’ economic choices during Reconstruction, leading them to prefer tenancy to wage labor, and leasing land for a fixed rent to sharecropping.” See Foner, *Reconstruction*, 103-104.

<sup>11</sup> “New Orleans Free People of Color to the Commander of the Department of the Gulf, and the Latter’s Reply,” in *Freedom, Series I, Volume III*, 594-598.

least of them in the old system themselves slave holders” for their mendacity. “If,” Hurlbut began, “instead of assembling in Mass meetings and wasting your time in high sounding Resolutions you would devote Yourselves to assisting in the physical and moral improvement of the Freedmen you would do some practical good.” The representatives hardly spoke for the “Emancipated Freedmen of Louisiana,” Hurlbut continued, “You are striving for social equality, they for personal freedom.” After outlining several important ways in which freedom for black Louisianans differed from slavery, Hurlbut argued that white attitudes and prejudices would not allow for the unsupervised operation of free labor:

You know further perfectly well that without some supervision on the part of the United States these Freedmen would be cheated of their labor, induced into contracts that would ruin them and even if fair contracts were made would be uncertain as to their fulfilment. You know this because you have seen it, because you have reported it, because you ask for the assistance of Military officers to remedy it.

As for unlimited mobility, Hurlbut deemed it impractical and potentially disastrous. The freedmen could not “be allowed to lie around and do nothing, because then they become paupers and thieves and fall upon the Government for support.” His own prejudice shining through quite clearly, Hurlbut concluded that a compromised system of free labor was all that could be hoped for. It was simply not practical, the General opined, to correct two centuries of abuse in “a day or a year.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* The mass meeting and Hurlbut were specifically discussing General Orders No. 23 issued by the Commander of the Gulf (Hurlbut) on March 11, 1865. In theory, Hurlbut planned to create a more uniform and efficient system of labor in Louisiana by establishing guidelines that planters and laborers must follow, such as tri-monthly payments and a differentiated wage structure based on a worker’s ability. The reality was that this new set of regulations were abused by the former slaveholders who were granted discretionary power to set wage rates and dictate nearly all of the terms of the labor contract. As one biographer of Hurlbut wrote, General Orders No. 23 was abused by “hundreds of planters who sought to convince their hands that the Union army had revived chattel slavery.” Whatever its other defects, General Orders No. 23 revealed the divide between Republican officials and the freedmen over the most important aspects of the labor system: Hurlbut wanted efficiency and regular payment; African Americans, however, wanted control

It was amid such an atmosphere of uncertainty that African Americans negotiated the development of free labor in the South. Whether labor contracts were signed willingly or at gunpoint—and many times simply ignored or never completed—the rise of free labor in the aftermath of the Civil War was accompanied at nearly every step by violence. Burgest's testimony, which he composed and submitted to the editors of the New Orleans *Tribune*, reveals some of the ways that such systematic violence influenced daily life. Colvit and his associates relied on physical force when necessary, but equally as pernicious were the threats, intimidations, and malicious manipulations of the judicial system that effectively deprived Burgest of his legal, political, and economic rights. As singular events, the tactics utilized by Colvit and others of his ilk may seem rather pedestrian, but the accumulated force of these daily iniquities allowed whites from across the state to bully and coerce African Americans with near impunity.<sup>13</sup> Even the most vigilant Freedmen's Bureau agents, after all, could only investigate and prosecute the most heinous outrages in their sub-districts.<sup>14</sup> While Burgest hoped to extricate himself from the situation by returning to his former home in Missouri, the overwhelming majority of field laborers had little hope of escaping from the trap into which they had fallen.

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of their own work and personal autonomy. See Jeffrey N. Lash, *A Politician Turned General: The Civil War Career of Stephen Augustus Hurlbut* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2003), 155.

<sup>13</sup> George C. Rable, *But there was no Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 43-58; James G. Hollandsworth, *An Absolute Massacre: The New Orleans Race Riot of June 30, 1866* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> For as much as white Southerners railed against the oppressiveness and the onerousness of the Freedmen's Bureau, the reality was that locations that were not under direct supervision of the Union army were often nearly lawless and outrages were perpetrated against the freedmen on a daily basis. The presence of even one Bureau agent, however, did mean that more federal authority could be obtained if the situation required it. If the Freedmen's Bureau remained unable to completely stop racial violence, it nonetheless provided an important service to African Americans and a modicum of protection for tens of thousands of black Southerners. For an insightful examination of the importance of the Union military during Reconstruction, see Gregory P. Downs, *After Appomattox: Military Occupation and the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

And yet, even as rampant racial violence sharply influenced the development of free labor in the postbellum South, African Americans did not simply concede defeat and accept that white Southerners would unilaterally shape the employee-employer relationship. Burgest's words are particularly insightful because they suggest ways in which black Southerners reacted, and responded, to violent employers. By nearly any accounting, Burgest and his fellow workers were patient and committed in their efforts to secure a labor contract sanctioned by the Freedmen's Bureau. Once they became convinced that their efforts would only result in "promises" and not a legitimate contract, a number of the laborers complained to the local Bureau agent—an effort that ultimately got them arrested by Colvit. Still others on the plantation went on strike when Colvit employed returned Confederates to keep them at their tasks, and some of the workers confiscated the Rebels' rifles and prevented the former soldiers from taking individual laborers off of the plantation "as it was thought they were to be killed in a clandestine manner." Personally, Burgest appealed to Colvit and the plantation owner for a redress of his grievances, found local allies willing to pay his extortionate bail, and finally turned to an African American newspaper in New Orleans in order to publicize the treatment he had received among the city's black community and to "obtain help to prosecute his case in the courts of the United States."<sup>15</sup>

Although Burgest may have had more resources than the average plantation laborer, black Southerners, as a group, were hardly defenseless, especially when they could rally federal support to their side. Burgest's decision to appeal to the black community of New Orleans through the *Tribune*, the city's most prominent black

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<sup>15</sup> New Orleans *Tribune*, September 23, 1866.

newspaper, was important, and it speaks to the centrality of the act of testifying in the creation of a sense of a larger black community, with shared interests, in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War.<sup>16</sup> Burgest's rationale was twofold, and evinces the desire both to warn other black laborers in New Orleans and improve his own situation. Furthermore, Burgest also clearly identified the federal government as a crucial ally in the effort to secure justice for himself and other black workers through his intention to prosecute his claim in federal court. It was through the Union presence, Burgest believed, that he would be able to successfully confront Colvit. As with racial violence in other spaces of the postbellum South, the federal government, largely through the Freedmen's Bureau, was critically important in mitigating the worst excesses of workplace violence. As Hurlbut's rejoinder to the group of free blacks in New Orleans—quoted above—reveals, however, the relationship between the freedmen and the Bureau was fraught with some uncertainty in regards to the development of free labor. A large part of this ambiguity can be attributed to Union directives that the freedmen must labor and not become dependents on the state. Thus, more than in other spaces, the Bureau was willing to live with the growing pains of progress, even if that meant that many laborers would be subject to violence and abuse.

Even with the recourse that African Americans might obtain, therefore, it is undeniable that racial violence closely impacted the labor relationship between black and white Southerners—and nearly always in a way that undercut African American's desire to control their own labor. To this end, Burgest's words offer startling insight into how

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<sup>16</sup> See Christopher Hager, *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Kidada E. Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

workplace violence influenced his understanding of the entire post-emancipation South. The mere existence of the complaint indicates that Burgest understood that he had been wronged and believed that he had rights as an American citizen that the state and white Louisianans were bound to respect. “The laws of Rapides Parish are administered wholly in the interests of the white man,” Burgest declared, “and the colored people have no justice whatever but are mostly worse off [than] when in slavery, by the general combination to rob and oppress him.” Whatever Republican paeans to free labor ideology might suggest, Burgest implied, conditions on the ground in Louisiana were anything but promising.<sup>17</sup>

Going further, Burgest’s testimony also permits us to witness how he interpreted his experience with labor violence in the context of emancipation and his relationship with the national government. Burgest identified his connection to the United States through his affiliation with the Union Army, perhaps revealing the belief that he deserved protection in return for the sacrifice he had made for his country. While Burgest had demonstrated his loyalty to the United States, he ridiculed the plantation owner who had “saved his property by hoisting the French flag over it” and declared that Colvit’s participation in the war amounted to “burning the sugar house, gin, and other property of the present Governor Wells and hunting Union refugees with dogs.” For this, “he was dubbed ‘Captain’ and now openly boasts of these deeds in behalf of the Confederacy as things to be proud of and ought to be remembered by his neighbors.”<sup>18</sup> The connections that Burgest drew between Colvit’s ties to the Confederacy and his post-war alacrity for forced labor are quite revealing of the former Union soldier’s state of mind. The Union

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<sup>17</sup> New Orleans *Tribune*, September 23, 1866.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*



might have won the war, but ex-Confederates were employing startling amounts of violence to win the peace and limit opportunities for black laborers.

Burgest's decision to publish his ordeal in the New Orleans *Tribune*, the first black daily newspaper in America, was also part of his plan to reveal just how "benevolent" Southern planters were, and to counsel other African Americans against a similar fate. Burgest's admonitions thus speak to a broader, coordinated effort among black Southerners to work together in order to obtain whatever protections they could.<sup>19</sup> "I warn all colored men not to go" to Rapides Parish, Burgest cautioned, "and especially not to hire out to this...Capt. Colvit, unless they want to be cheated out of all they earn and vilely abused without redress." Burgest further reported several other examples of Colvit's and the plantation owner's perfidy, but he also related how area blacks had counteracted such enduring Rebel sympathy. When it was suggested that local whites assemble a "Vigilance Committee" to drive out all of those who supported the Union, Burgest remarked that someone mused that it was "not safe to molest five hundred Springfield rifle-muskets, with each a hundred rounds in the hands of soldiers of Vicksburg [trained] under Grant and Sheridan for five years." Burgest then concluded with a plaintive request that evinced a nuanced understanding of the developments of early Reconstruction:

Messrs. Editors, I hope you will publish these grievances of mine first to show the feelings of the reconstructed Confederates, secondly, to warn other colored men so they may not fall into this rebel trap, and thirdly, to perhaps enable me to find means to prosecute my claims and bring these offenders to the justice of the United States law, as declared in the new Civil Rights Bill.

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<sup>19</sup> For an analysis of the importance of testimony in creating a shared commitment to resistance against racial violence, see Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me*.

With that, he signed off, “for freedom protected by law.”<sup>20</sup> His tone both cautious and optimistic, Burgest embraced the possibilities of free labor ideology even as he articulated an understanding of exactly how far such a vision was from reality in the postbellum South. Countless African Americans would pay the ultimate price in the effort to will such a republic into being.

The genesis of workplace violence was the long-held belief of white Southerners that African Americans were unfit for freedom, and that blacks must be treated as slaves—with all the requisite brutality—or they simply would not work. Such principles were cornerstones of both antebellum politics and the Confederacy, and they continued to shape white attitudes far into the postbellum years.<sup>21</sup> Phrased in a slightly different manner, white employers alleged that black laborers would have to be coerced and controlled if they were to perform any work at all. Slavery might be over, but white Southerners interpreted the transformed landscape of postwar America as a revolutionary place where the subordinate status of African Americans needed to be firmly reinforced in order for white employers to extract labor from recalcitrant employees. At best, sympathetic white Southerners, and the vast majority of federal officials, believed that it would require a great deal of time for black workers to acclimate themselves to the personal responsibilities of free labor.<sup>22</sup> These allegations ran directly against black demands that workers be allowed to independently negotiate contracts and move about freely in order to maximize the return on their labor. Even more important than

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<sup>20</sup> New Orleans *Tribune*, September 23, 1866.

<sup>21</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 199-201.

<sup>22</sup> Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 39-73.

remunerative differences, however, was the centrality of personal, bodily control to black laborers. For African Americans in the postbellum South, quite simply, the ability to retain a sense of individual autonomy in the workplace was paramount.

Assigned to Bureau offices in Shreveport, Louisiana, in the summer of 1865, Lieutenant W.B. Stickney reported that local planters were determined to retain coercive power over the freedmen they employed. “The change in the system of labor incident to the occupation of the country by our armies,” Stickney bluntly declared, had “caused considerable anxiety on the part of the planter.” Hundreds of planters had already visited his office “to ascertain what was to be the policy of the government in regard to the negro, and to acquaint me with his incapacity to take care of himself, of his indolence, stupidity, his thievish disposition...[and the] impossibility of cultivating the country without some means of ‘controlling’ the persons of laborers.” The root of the problem stemmed from the fact that “there seems to be no definite comprehension of the change produced by a four years war, and they cannot look upon the colored man as *free* man.” Furthermore, the planters loudly proclaimed that the United States had no power to emancipate their slaves “and, basing their actions upon these ideas, they not only desire to have a guard placed upon their plantations to compel the negro to work, but still persist in having the right to exercise the same authority over the persons of the Freedmen as in former times.” For certain planters, old habits proved particularly difficult to break. According to Stickney, nearly a dozen freedmen had complained to him that their employers had outraged their person in an attempt to force the laborers to work.<sup>23</sup> While the assaults that the black men and women described were similar to those that they had

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<sup>23</sup> “Freedmen’s Bureau Assistant Superintendent at Shreveport, Louisiana, to the Louisiana Freedmen’s Bureau Assistant Commissioner,” in *Freedom, Series III, Volume I*, 231-236.

endured under slavery, these individuals demanded that their emancipation and elevation to the status of free laborer should provide them the opportunity to control their own destiny in the workplace.

In countless locations throughout the South, Bureau officials reported similar situations in which white employers sought to control their black employees through violence. Colonel A. Watson Webber reported in September 1865 that white planters in Franklin Parish, Louisiana, were treating the freedmen “fully as bad, if not worse, than in slave times.” “The tying up of women by the thumbs,” Webber continued, “and the cruel punishment of all classes and ages of colored people is indulged in to the heart’s content of these enlightened and humane whites.” White employers were particularly prone to violence: “To them there seems to be no recourse, when a servant errs—except to the shot-gun or the lash.” As evidence further of white intransigence, Webber enclosed a portion of a labor contract that E.W. Reitzell forced his employees to sign:

For the services of the within-named freed woman of color, E.W. Reitzell binds himself to feed, clothe, house and furnish medical attention to her for the time above specified [August 1, 1865 to January 1, 1866]. *The consideration paid on the part of the employer will be of the same quality and quantity as were furnished the employee while she was the SLAVE of the employer.*<sup>24</sup>

Although few planters, at least in writing, were as blatant in their intentions to coerce black laborers the same as they had the enslaved, the contract that Reitzell offered his employees was representative of the broader effort among whites to unilaterally dictate the terms of the labor relationship.

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<sup>24</sup> “Commander of U.S. Forces at Columbia, Louisiana, to the Headquarters of the Western District of Louisiana, Enclosing a Contract between a Louisiana Former Slaveholder and His Former Slave,” in *Freedom, Series III, Volume I*, 165-166.

For some white employers, the need to manipulate and coerce their former slaves became a violent obsession. In an affidavit sworn out in September 1865, Minerva Banks claimed that “since Christmas 1863 I have made Tennessee my home and since my...[son] Charles enlisted as a soldier I have regarded myself as free & have been so informed and believe it to be true.” During the middle of June 1865, however, Banks contracted to work for Mr. W.H. Martin of Cadiz, Kentucky, for “seven Dollars & 50 cents per month.” She had been at work only a few days, however, before her former owner tracked her down:

Edward Sommers my former master...came to Mrs Martin’s with Dr Russell who brought a gun & threatened to shoot me if I offered to resist or run, Sommers at first being hid. Sommers then came up with a large whip & accosted me saying he was afraid he would have to die before seeing me as he wanted to live to give me one good thrashing— Sommers then took me off from the house about ½ mile into the woods. He then took the bridle rein from his buggy & hung me up by the neck for some time & then took me down & compelled me by force to strip *naked* & then tied my hands to a limb of the tree so that my feet but just touched the ground. then cut limbs from the trees with which he scourged me for a long time whipping me from my head to my feet...

The physical assault was brutal, but Sommers also went to great lengths to demonstrate that he could still control Banks like he once had as her master by treating her like an animal, forcing her to remove her clothes in his presence, and whipping her mercilessly. Banks’ new employer, meanwhile, had sat idly by as Sommers assaulted her, and Martin then permitted Banks to work “until about Sept 1<sup>st</sup> when he informed that he would not pay me any thing as he was obliged to pay my wages to Mr Sommers.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> “Affidavit of a Kentucky Freedwoman, and a Tennessee Attorney to the Tennessee and Kentucky Freedmen’s Bureau Assistant Commissioner,” in *Freedom, Series I, Volume I, The Destruction of Slavery*, eds. Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 654-656. Banks also noted that she only accepted employment with Martin after she had been forced to leave the employ of a lawyer named Davis in Cadiz, Kentucky, due to constant abuse at the hands of his wife.

Although the assault that Minerva Banks endured was extreme, the violence that Sommers inflicted on her body was similar in form and function to that utilized by other former slaveholders who sought to intimidate their black employees in the immediate aftermath of emancipation. As African Americans and federal officials noted, employers resorted to old tortures and old instruments to undercut the contractual nature of free labor. Under contractual labor agreements, however, these practices carried new meanings. If a slaveholder might have turned to the lash to speed production, among other reasons, an employer did so in order to demonstrate that newly formed employer-employee partnerships did not equate to black autonomy in the work space. The profuse application of these traditional forms of violence, therefore, should not be understood as an attempt to systematically reestablish slavery as much as a direct repudiation of the idea of the labor contract—one of the foundational components of free labor. Such a distinction was important to the freedpeople. Whereas federal officials often employed language that referenced a return to slave-like conditions, black workers normally phrased their complaints to emphasize how employer violence violated the contractual rights they possessed as free laborers.<sup>26</sup> To this end, Banks' testimony never spoke to a potential return to slavery; rather, as a free woman who prioritized personal control, she attested to her ability to negotiate contracts for three jobs during 1865 from three different employers. The violent assault she endured could not make her a slave again—

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<sup>26</sup> See "Affidavit of a Kentucky Freedwoman," in *Freedom, Series I, Volume II*, 677-678. On the centrality of the contract to conceptions of freedom, see Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 35, *passim*.

but it could limit her independence in the workplace and deprive her of the \$7.50 per month for which she had bargained.<sup>27</sup>

While white employers turned to racial violence, in general, to coerce and control black laborers, specific components of the free labor system were particularly rife with confrontation. The moment—and space—most fraught with violence was the culmination of the labor contract, when African American workers were due their wages. The tangible and contractual exchange of currency or goods must have been a jarring experience for whites accustomed to dictate on their own terms when compensation would be allowed to their former slaves. For black laborers, the moment of remuneration was a powerful reminder that gainful employment provided African American workers with a degree of economic autonomy that they had never before possessed. After all, it had been relatively common for enslaved persons to perform wage labor before the Civil War, both for their owners and as bodies hired by other whites.<sup>28</sup> Payments for extra labor on Sundays or compensation provided to a slaveholder for the services of his human property, however, were drastically different than the situation that confronted white employers in the postbellum South. Not only were whites forced to negotiate with black employees over the terms of their labor contracts, employers also faced the very real possibility that they would lose their black workers if wages were not paid on time or when African Americans laborers believed they were due. In the postbellum South, even simple transactions such as the payment of laborers for services performed—the

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<sup>27</sup> “Affidavit of a Kentucky Freedwoman, and a Tennessee Attorney to the Tennessee and Kentucky Freedmen’s Bureau Assistant Commissioner,” in *Freedom, Series I, Volume I*, 654-656.

<sup>28</sup> Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Jonathan D. Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

foundational bedrock on which capitalism and the ideology of free labor was built—were fraught with physical and psychological consequences for all involved.

At the insistence of white farmers and federal officials, it was common practice for freedpeople engaged in agricultural work to sign twelve-month labor contracts near the beginning of the calendar year.<sup>29</sup> Given the cyclical nature of such work, it was also routine for employers to delay payment until particular crops were harvested. In some cases laborers might receive a small portion of their agreed upon salary quarterly or monthly, but final settlement nearly universally came at harvest time or the end of the year. Employers sometimes paid in cash, but it was also normal for black workers to receive a portion of the crop. The practice of signing lengthy contracts, therefore, was despised by the freedmen because it bound them to an employer for an extended period of time and normally carried the expectation that only a fraction of one's wages would be paid throughout the year. As one Bureau official noted, "All freedmen object to being only paid half of their wages at the end of the month or quarter."<sup>30</sup> If a black laborer failed to complete their contract through negligence or because they did not meet the white farmer's expectations, it was nearly impossible to collect wages for the services they had performed throughout the year without the intervention of the Freedmen's Bureau. The expectation of white planters, clearly, was that black workers would remain

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<sup>29</sup> See "Labor Regulations by the General Superintendent of Freedmen in Alabama, Mississippi, and the Department of the Gulf, as Printed in a Louisiana Newspaper"; "Circular by the Louisiana Freedmen's Bureau Assistant Commissioner"; "Broadside by the Freedmen's Bureau Assistant Superintendent at Shreveport, Louisiana," in *Freedom, Series III, Volume I*, 333-336, 881-882, 968-969.

<sup>30</sup> William E. Dougherty to Lieutenant D.G. Fenno, November 7, 1865, in Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Louisiana, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869, Record Group 105, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, National Archives Microfilm Publication M1027 (hereafter cited as Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1027), reel no. 8.



dependent on their employer throughout the entirety of the contract because most of their remuneration was held until the contract's completion.

White planters often took advantage of this situation and violently exercised their supposed authority in the labor relationship by discharging or evicting freedmen for minimal transgressions a short time before payment of wages was due. Thomas Williams complained of such treatment from Point Coupee Parish, Louisiana, in April 1866. According to Williams, he and several other freedmen had worked for Madame F. Riche and her son-in-law, Louis Cavalier, since May 1865 under the agreement that the laborers would receive half the crop each season, "the laborers to find themselves in everything." By April 1866, however, Williams had yet to receive any of the crop and Cavalier abruptly evicted him for missing two days of work to attend the funeral of an "old acquaintance" in Baton Rouge.<sup>31</sup> As Williams testified, both Riche and Cavalier had sought to dictate the freedmen's movement and physically retain him on the plantation even when he was not engaged in contractual labor. The subsequent eviction of the freedman for travelling to Baton Rouge, plainly, was a clear statement that the white property owners believed that they would unilaterally decide the working conditions under which the freedmen must labor.

Although Thomas Williams' complaint to the Freedmen's Bureau ultimately forced Cavalier to release the share of the crop that Williams was due, not every freedmen was able to successfully press their claims against their employer. George Robinson testified in September 1865 that his employer threatened to kill the freedman if he did not leave the farm where he had worked for nearly six months. According to

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<sup>31</sup> "Complaint of a Louisiana Freedman," in *Freedom, Series III, Volume II*, 413.

Robinson's affidavit, he and a group of freedmen had worked for Joseph Wade since April to bring in a crop of corn before Wade brusquely "told us that we had done no work worth paying for and that we had got to leave the place, and that he was not agoing to pay us." Wade threatened that "he would give me three days to leave the place, and if I came back he would shoot me—that he would put Forty (40) Buck Shot in the top of my head."<sup>32</sup> Unlike Thomas Williams, Robinson was unable to gather his portion of the crop from Joseph Wade, his eviction compounded by the fact that he had worked for nearly half of the year without receiving anything for his efforts.

The practice of driving away black workers before paying them was an integral part of white efforts to destabilize the workplace for African Americans and make them more dependent on individual employers. Although this may appear counterintuitive, it is clear that evictions were not intended to simply sever the labor relationship, an action that would have allowed a black worker to freely seek new employment. Rather, white employers drove away black employees in an attempt to discipline workers who they believed were becoming too difficult to control. Because most freedmen desperately needed their yearly wages, white employers believed that they would sacrifice personal autonomy for the security of remuneration. In other words, no other employer would pay black workers the wages they had supposedly lost except the one that had driven them away—if, that is, the worker returned and assented to the white employer's demands. Lieutenant L.S. Butler, Assistant Superintendent at the Bureau office in Alexandria, Louisiana, reported on this phenomenon in July 1865. According to Butler, some planters wanted "to send nearly all of them [black workers] away" when their crops were

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<sup>32</sup> "Affidavit of a Louisiana Freedman," in *Freedom, Series III, Volume I*, 762.

“laid by,” and only retain their services when it was necessary for more labor to be performed. These same planters had also conspired so as to prevent anyone else in the vicinity from hiring these workers. “An anonymous letter was brought to my attention the other day,” Butler explained, “warning parties against hireing [*sic*] these people; threatening destruction of their property if they do.”<sup>33</sup> These seasonal evictions, quite clearly, did not align with the aspirations of black laborers in Alexandria who sought to determine when and where they would sell their labor. To reestablish black dependence on themselves, therefore, white employers turned to threats of violence.

Although agricultural workers often had a difficult time obtaining their fair share of the season’s crop, or were more likely to face the prospect of seasonal eviction, they were hardly the only group of black laborers who were threatened and assaulted by white employers who simply refused to pay black employees for work they had performed. Such practices were so widespread in Kentucky that the vast majority of the cases heard at the Louisville Freedmen’s Court—a military court operated by the Bureau—dealt with non-payment of wages. Often, black employees reported verbal and physical abuse in addition to the withholding of earnings that were contractually and legally theirs. Thomas Chase testified in July 1866 that he had worked for James Hablin of Jefferson County for six months when, without warning, Hablin “commenced cursing and abusing” Chase and “threatened to shoot him” before ordering Chase to leave his residence. When Chase asked to be paid for the work he had done, Hablin “picked up something from the ground and struck him with it on the side of the face a very severe blow.” Chase concluded that he had worked from January 1 until June 28 under a written contract—and

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<sup>33</sup> Lieutenant L.S. Butler to Thomas W. Conway, July 10, 1865, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 7.

that Hablin had not paid him any money.<sup>34</sup> While Hablin had hoped to violently overwhelm Chase, the freedmen continued to pursue his claim through the Freedmen's Court and asserted that the white employer was legally bound to respect his contractual rights within the workplace.

Even when white employers were willing to pay African American laborers on time, they were likely to respond violently to any overt expressions of black autonomy within the work space. George Carr recounted in September 1866 that he had chopped wood and planted corn for Robert Porter of Jefferson County and earned \$20, of which he had been paid ten. Shortly thereafter, Carr secured work with Levin Dorsey, at which time Porter threatened that he would "bury [Carr] in the woods" if Carr demanded the remainder of his wages. Although Porter had apparently been satisfied with the work that Carr had performed, the freedman's decision to exercise personal mobility within the workplace and seek a new opportunity for himself had revealed to the white employer that Carr was quite independent and determined to chart his own future. Realizing that he had lost control of his employee, Porter decided that discharging Carr without paying the freedman the remainder of his wages was not enough—he threatened that he would murder Carr for having the temerity to decide his own future. While Carr's new employer protected him for the time being, once Dorsey left the county, Porter alleged that Carr owed him \$60 and that he must report to the neighborhood of Middletown to pay the fine. Disoriented, Carr went to the Freedmen's Court and confessed that he was "afraid to go to Middletown for fear he will be whipped and ill used, or perhaps killed."

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<sup>34</sup> Affidavit of Thomas Chase, July 9, 1866, in Records of the Field Offices of the State of Kentucky, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872, Record Group 105, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, National Archives Microfilm Publication M1904 (hereafter cited as Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1904), reel no. 120.

Like many other freedmen, Carr felt vulnerable and alone—and sure in the knowledge that his former white employer would kill him in the attempt to reassert his sense of control in the work space.<sup>35</sup>

Given the aversion of many whites to promptly paying African American workers, it is unsurprising that black mobility and competition from other prospective employers further infuriated the men and women accustomed to exercising control of black bodies in the economic sphere. For the freedmen and freedwomen emerging from years of bondage, the opportunity to sell one's labor to the highest or preferred bidder was a fundamental transformation of their position in American society.<sup>36</sup> Such freedom of their person and liberty of movement represented a stark break with the past, and the freedmen latched onto the chance to seek new employment as part of the effort to retain independence in the workplace. While many freedmen left jobs in order to seek work under other employers, true economic autonomy also meant that black men and women had the right to choose when they did not want to work.<sup>37</sup> For white employers, these two possibilities—the freedmen leaving their employ to find new work, or simply choosing to not work—were unacceptable because they provided black laborers with an unheard of degree of autonomy in the workplace. If the former represented a direct repudiation of a white employer's ability to dictate the terms of labor, white Southerners

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<sup>35</sup> Affidavit of George Carr, September 1, 1866, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 120. Carr's testimony reveals how the employer-employee relationship could sometimes pit several whites against one another. This is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

<sup>36</sup> For an alternate interpretation of the introduction of free labor in the South as a failure due to the complicated and unruly state of labor regulations, see James D. Schmidt, *Free to Work: Labor Law, Emancipation, and Reconstruction, 1815-1880* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

<sup>37</sup> See William E. Dougherty to Lieutenant D.G. Fenno, October 23, 1865, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 8.

interpreted the latter as vagrancy and idleness, two claims that were levelled nearly exclusively against African Americans in the postbellum South.<sup>38</sup>

Individual employers were more likely to utilize violence to prevent individual employees from exercising self-determination in the workplace, but in some instances white vitriol became so intense that groups of white terrorists refused to allow anyone to employ the freedmen except their former masters. In April 1866, Brigadier General John Ely wrote to Captain H.S. Brown and described the “the fiendish outrages committed by white people, who are in many cases banded together under the cognomen of ‘Regulators’ ‘Nigger Killers’ &c operating” in the counties surrounding Lexington, Kentucky. As matters stood at the moment, local whites refused to hire black workers because the “self styled regulators” threatened the persons and property of any white citizen that might assist in the material elevation of black laborers. Ely reported that the presence of Union troops in the city and in other towns throughout neighboring counties evoked “a marked change for the better in the sentiments of the people toward the Bureau,” but rural areas of the state were nearly lawless and at the mercy of marauding whites. “These scoundrels are generally returned rebel soldiers of the lowest grade of white humanity,” Ely noted, “working at no respectable employment, the graduates of the corner groceries and grog dens of their regions.”<sup>39</sup> Quite content to remain idle themselves, these white brigands resorted to violence to prevent black laborers from moving about freely to seek remunerative work.

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<sup>38</sup> See “Commander of the Post of Port Hudson, Louisiana, to the Headquarters of the Eastern District of Louisiana, in *Freedom, Series III, Volume I*, 663-665.

<sup>39</sup> “Freedmen’s Bureau Chief Superintendent for the District of Kentucky to the Headquarters of the Kentucky and Tennessee Freedmen’s Bureau Assistant Commissioner,” in *Freedom, Series II, The Black Military Experience*, eds. Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie P. Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 761-762.

This rampant terrorism in the counties surrounding Lexington had effectively stifled black efforts to seek the better employment opportunities, and even some local whites reported that the potential for violence had convinced employers that freely hiring black laborers was too risky. According to Ely, local blacks were more than willing to work, and “were it not for the terrorism incited by lawless bands heretofore mentioned there would be no difficulty in finding good homes and competent employment for every freedman” in the district. Many of the “well disposed white people who reside at places remote from the stations where troops are posted are afraid to employ black men,” Ely concluded.<sup>40</sup> For the group of violent whites, the only employment that was acceptable for local freedmen was agricultural work under the direct supervision of their former masters. Although black workers often resisted these positions because of the lingering sense of subordination and dependence that former slaveholders attempted to insert into the labor relationship, in this particular situation the reality of widespread racial violence severely limited their options.

While not every employer was as brutally violent as the white gangs who John Ely denounced, it was entirely possible to create a false sense of black dependence in the work space through more subtle means. Mary Ellen Gardner, a freedwoman living in Henry County, Kentucky, testified in August 1866 that she had worked faithfully under contract for Lucy Ann McGruder, her former owner, since the time of her emancipation “by the Proclamation of the President.” In spite of her efforts, Gardner complained that McGruder “would always so manage that she [Gardner] had not had a chance to go to church for more than a year.” By late summer 1866 Gardner had had enough. Leaving

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

another woman “to take care of the house,” Gardner traveled four miles to “an association meeting and returned in afternoon of [the] same day.” Upon Gardner’s return, however, Lucy McGruder turned violent. First, she threatened that Gardner’s children would have to be apprenticed due to the freedwoman’s impudence “and then they could make her stay at home.” Gardner protested, but she was swiftly denounced by McGruder’s son who “then called her a Damned yellow bitch and said to her you think you are free but I’ll show you whether you are or not.”<sup>41</sup> Here was the crux of the confrontation: Gardner firmly believed that her status as a free person entitled her to control her own time as long as she fulfilled the obligations of her labor contract. Unable to attend church because of how McGruder manipulated her schedule, Gardner made the unilateral decision to have another African American woman cover her shift. It was a simple solution that employees utilize every day. For McGruder, however, whether or not anyone took “care of the house” was beside the point: she intended to dictate when and where Gardner labored. The freedwoman must be made dependent in the workplace and shown, McGruder’s son thundered, that she was “not” free after all.

In order to effect the pseudo-dependent state on Gardner that McGruder and her son desired, the white employers realized that something more tangible than verbal intimidation would be required. According to Gardner, McGruder’s son “then went in the house” after threatening the freedwoman and “got a cowhide and came out and whipped her with it giving her about twenty stripes some of them leaving the marks on her flesh.”<sup>42</sup> In this instance, McGruder employed violence especially reminiscent of slavery, and the language he used directly likened whipping Gardner to demonstrating

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<sup>41</sup> Affidavit of Mary Ellen Gardner, August 20, 1866, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 120.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*



that she was dependent and not truly free. In whipping Gardner, furthermore, the white man marked her body with scars in the same way that slaveholders had for generations. Citing her status as a free laborer, however, Gardner rejected the notion that McGruder's violence would compel her to admit that she did not possess the right to determine her own future within the work space. Once she had determined that her only option was to flee and take her children with her, therefore, Gardner promptly left. To remain employed under her former mistress, she realized, would mean forever remaining in a labor relationship where her employer viewed Gardner as a cog to be controlled and dominated. She did not know where she would find a home for herself and children—only that she could no longer live under Lucy McGruder's thumb and enjoy the rights to contractual labor that she had won through emancipation. Leveraging her new status even further, Gardner sought to retrieve her wages through the auspices of the Freedmen's Court.<sup>43</sup> The freedwoman, it was clear, would remain dependent no longer.

In their refusal to allow black laborers to determine their own economic prospects, pay wages when contractually obligated, and accept black mobility and economic competition from other employers, white Southerners sought to erect a system of free labor premised on perpetual black dependence that trapped workers in low-paying jobs with limited potential for economic improvement. It was in the face of this intransigent mindset that African American workers emerged from slavery, determined to control their own fate—and their own bodies—in the workplace while prioritizing

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<sup>43</sup> Virtually all of the cases heard at the Freedmen's Court in Louisville that involved wage disputes ended with black laborers making a similar decision. It is apparent that the workers who filed affidavits and complaints wanted their rightful wages paid and the freedom to seek different employment. I did not find a single case where a black laborer desired to return and work for an employer that had violent abused them. For a few examples, see Affidavit of Melinda Brown, October 10, 1867; Affidavit of Julia Coleman, August 16, 1867; Affidavit of Fanny Crooms, September 25, 1867, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 120.

personal choice and economic autonomy. Although they resorted to other machinations throughout Reconstruction, whites regularly sought to cement the freedmen's supposed reliance on their employers through violence. The level of such terrorism was staggering. Stationed in Opelousas, Louisiana, in the summer of 1869, Captain Frank M. Cone of the Twenty-Fifth Colored Infantry regiment could hardly fathom the hatred that local whites evinced towards the freedmen. Planters and other businessmen would rather exterminate local African Americans than treat them as free men and citizens, Cone concluded, and the civil government could do nothing to protect black workers. "I can place my hands upon four men in this town today, who are reeking with the blood of deliberate murder of loyal men," Cone began, "yet the law is blind to their foul offences." The "record of the parish is a lawless one," Cone wrote on July 29, and whites continued to abuse blacks at will. The rampant, everyday violence had done little but breed "belligerent animosity" between whites and blacks, and Cone concluded that there was little hope the area would experience "honest industry" in the near future.<sup>44</sup> It was an apt supposition. All of the violence that white employers had mustered, after all, had done little but breed disillusionment and push black laborers to demand even more fervently that their rights be respected.

Workplace violence was an issue that confronted African Americans in nearly every setting across the postbellum South, but there were important differences in how workers in different geographic settings experienced such violence. In the aftermath of

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<sup>44</sup> Frank M. Cone to George Baldey, May 8; June 8; and July 29, 1869, in United States Army Twenty-Fifth Colored Infantry Regiment Letterbook, 1869, Mss. 4912, Special Collections, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

the Civil War, the vast majority of black men remained in agricultural employment—either as laborers or independent farmers. Often isolated in the Southern countryside, black farmers dealt with violent whites, artificially deflated wages, and the psychological remnants of slavery that former masters lorded over their new employees to artificially stimulate black dependence. On countless occasions, vengeful white Southerners simply evicted black landowners who they could no longer control. An assault on a group of black farmers residing in Franklin County, Kentucky, in April 1872 was typical. Late one evening, a group of fifteen white men administered a beating to the freedmen and ordered them to vacate their land. The following morning, the men left their homes and moved to Frankfort in search of safety and security.<sup>45</sup> Living in the cities and towns scattered across the South did not always provide black workers with complete physical safety, but remote farms and plantations were even more susceptible to potentially violent whites due to the absence of federal troops and possible witnesses. In rural areas black women often worked alongside their husbands, brothers, and fathers in the fields, but they were also able to obtain jobs as domestic servants within white households. The notion that life inside the antebellum plantation mansion was peaceful has long since been shattered, and African American women found themselves subject to everyday forms of violence at the hands of white women as well as men.<sup>46</sup>

The urban environment, at least in theory, provided relief to workers because of the increased number of employment opportunities, the potential mobility of black laborers, and the support that burgeoning black communities could offer, but large

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<sup>45</sup> George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and "Legal Lynchings"* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 38.

<sup>46</sup> Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

numbers of African American men and women remained vulnerable in low-paying jobs and at the mercy of often despotic employers. Although quite a few blacks were able to prosper through ingenuity and hard work in the postbellum South, the truth remained that economic opportunities were limited in urban locations due to racial prejudice and the willingness of white Southerners to resort to shocking levels of violence to maintain social and economic control of black workers.<sup>47</sup> Although black business owners might hope to escape some of the hardships confronting black laborers, these individuals were often targeted precisely because of their apparent success. As symbols of African American achievement, prosperous blacks were particularly troublesome to whites who were intent on manipulating black workers to their own advantage. The harassment and imprisonment of William H. Bryant in August 1865 was simply “ANOTHER OUTRAGE,” the New Orleans *Tribune* declared. According to Bryant, he stopped a group of white children from assaulting a black child in front of his business. For his actions, Bryant “was arrested and taken before R.H. Slough; he refused to take my evidence ‘or my brothers’ or any of my witnesses, as they were ‘niggers.’” Still, Bryant refused to back down. “I went to the Commissioner of Freedmen, and he went to the Mayor,” he concluded. “The Mayor found out that he had a man of nerve to deal with...and as soon as the Military Court is organized, I intend to have justice if it costs me all I am worth.”<sup>48</sup> At least in some cases, as Bryant’s experience made evident, the resources available in the urban environment afforded black Southerners the opportunity to achieve redress when they had been violently wronged.

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<sup>47</sup> Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891* (Frankfort: The Kentucky Historical Society, 2003), 277-285.

<sup>48</sup> New Orleans *Tribune*, August 9, 1865.

Troubling as such attacks on independent, African American businessmen were, the reality for most black Southerners was that they would remain agricultural laborers for their entire lives. Residing largely in rural locations, black farm workers were often unable to leverage the rights they possessed as free laborers without tangible assistance from the Freedmen's Bureau. From the intensity of reports filtering into New Orleans from rural Louisiana, it was apparent that white planters were perpetrating a reign of terror in their attempts to manipulate the freed labor force. "We continue to receive the most afflicting intelligence from our country parishes," an August 1865 editorial in the New Orleans *Tribune* exclaimed. "Freedmen are wantonly killed by planters. No practical freedom is secured yet."<sup>49</sup> On July 3, 1866, Captain M.L Norton reported from near Baton Rouge that a white man named Lewis J. Kelly had shot and killed a freedman named Pannum Ramsey that he employed on his farm after a brief labor dispute. Kelly claimed that Ramsey had walked menacingly towards him while carrying a hoe, at which point Kelly "went in to the house, got his shot gun and shot Ramsey dead, Kelly being about 12 ft. from him when he shot." The white farmer immediately went to the Justice of the Peace, and "was tried and acquitted on account of accusable homicide. Several freed people who saw [the] occurrence were not examined. Kelly left his house," Norton explained, "and has not returned home."<sup>50</sup> Although physical assaults and beatings were more common than murder, Kelly's violent response to Ramsey's brazenness revealed clearly how planters responded to even the slightest hint that their dominance in the work place might be questioned.

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, August 22, 1865.

<sup>50</sup> "Report of Murders, Outrages, Assaults, etc. Committed on and by Freedmen since Organization of the Bureau to Feb'y 20<sup>th</sup> in the State of Louisiana," July 3, 1866, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 34.

Kelly's quick acquittal by local civil authorities revealed another reality for rural workers: without federal or military courts, virtually no violent white perpetrators could be brought to justice. While black workers in the rural South prioritized personal choice and self-determination in their labor relationships, there were, nonetheless, fewer consequences for white employers who resorted to violence in the attempt to assert their control over their employees. In the summer of 1866, Captain Napoleon B. Blanton detailed the vicious assault that J.W. Cook administered to Alfred Ward in Bienville Parish. Ward, a freedman employed by Cook, "was ordered to strip himself to be whipped" after failing to meet his employer's expectations. "Refusing, [Ward] was beaten with a spoke of a wheel until he did so. When whipped received about 400 lashes with a buggy strap." Blanton confirmed that the wounds and gashes Ward received were still evident over a month after the assault. Seemingly unconcerned with the consequences of his actions, Cook appeared before Blanton at the local Bureau office and claimed that he "did all the whipping and would take all the responsibility." It almost went without saying, but Blanton reported nonetheless that Cook had been allowed to go free: "No action was taken by [the] Civil Authorities."<sup>51</sup> As James Ward and countless other freedmen discovered, it was difficult to secure self-determination without a venue in which workers could leverage their status as free laborers and force recalcitrant employers to abide by legally-signed contracts.

A number of factors worked together to create such high levels of everyday violence in rural areas. First, the nature of agricultural work in the postbellum South

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, July 28, 1866, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 34.

closely mimicked the work that had been done by enslaved peoples before the war.<sup>52</sup> The fact that most African Americans remained in the same geographic area after emancipation meant that white employers had previous contact with many of their workers as slaves, and it was rather predictable that white Southerners would fall back on old habits during labor disputes. On the other hand, the extent of workplace violence also evinced the deep-seated fears among white employers that black employees would take complete control of their persons and refuse to willingly labor for white farmers and planters. The former slaveholders went to great lengths to convince blacks that land in the South was not to be equally divided, and countless white farmers expressed the fear that without willing, cheap laborers their business model was unsustainable.<sup>53</sup> Still other fears centered on the belief that conflict between blacks and whites would ultimately end in a race war with the complete extermination of one group. When white Southerners discussed this possibility, their language was often apocalyptic.<sup>54</sup> The final dynamic at work in the rural South, simply put, was opportunity. There were more freedmen in the Southern backcountry, and there were less federal agents to enforce the protective

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<sup>52</sup> This chapter, for the sake of analytical clarity, compresses a great deal of complexity into the simple designation of “rural” agricultural laborers. Similar to the way in which the production of different cash crops, or the presence of a dominant regional staple, influenced the working conditions of enslaved persons, local variation after emancipation sometimes created opportunities for wage laborers to thrive. For example, John C. Rodrigue has demonstrated how black workers contributed to the establishment of free labor in Louisiana’s sugar parishes through collective action that took advantage of the harvest cycle of sugar cane. Still, their success was largely tied to the Republican presence in Louisiana, and in the 1880s their conditions seriously deteriorated. See Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields*.

<sup>53</sup> See “Provost Marshal of the District of Port Hudson, Louisiana, to the Louisiana Freedmen’s Bureau Assistant Commissioner”; “White Louisianans to the Governor of Louisiana,” in *Freedom, Series III, Volume I*, 705-706, 820-821.

<sup>54</sup> *Lexington Observer & Reporter*, January 6, 1869. This January 1869 report that detailed an attack upon a white farmer in Georgia by several black men on an open highway was typical. Without providing any semblance of context, the report concluded that the “outrage” proved “conclusively the existence of an organization and a settled purpose on the part of the negroes in the country to bring on a war with the whites....It is time...to let these scoundrels know that they are not masters of the land. They have commenced as did the Indians, and their fate will be similar.”

legislation that trickled out of Congress. Rural violence, the freedmen claimed, never stopped.

Thornton Burriss ably testified to the obsession with mastery that still animated rural planters after emancipation. A resident of Oldham County, Kentucky, Burriss traveled to Louisville in August 1866 to swear out an affidavit against his former employer, Walter Mayo. According to Burriss, “about the middle of last February he hired himself [to Mayo]...to work for the balance of the year 1866 for seventy five dollars.” At the same time, Mayo also hired Burriss’ nephew, Peter Fontaine, a young man who had been enslaved by the Mayo family. The year had apparently passed with little incident until the end of August, when Mayo became angry with Burriss’ nephew and he “beat & whipped the boy Peter with the stock of an oxe whip. The next day he commenced whipping Peter again and he Thornton spoke to him and said Mr. Mayo dont whip that boy so much.” In response, Mayo threatened Burriss and then struck the freedman “3 or 4” times with the same whip. Although Burriss managed to escape for a few seconds, Walter’s brother, Robert C. Mayo, quickly appeared on the scene and “struck him with the same stick on the head and knocked him down and struck him several times while he was down.” At last, Burriss made his escape, but he feared to return, “as he was terrified at being informed that Mayo had told the other servants that he would shoot him Thornton if he ever saw him on his place.”<sup>55</sup> Although it was unclear as to why Mayo had begun assaulting Fontaine, it was evident that the former slave owner escalated the situation when Burriss intervened to assert the newfound autonomy that he and his nephew enjoyed as free laborers.

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<sup>55</sup> Affidavit of Thornton Burriss, August 30, 1866, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 119.



Black women and young girls were also commonly exposed to violent white employers in the rural South. After the Civil War, many African American men hoped to remove their wives and daughters from the fields to reduce the risk that they would come into contact with violent whites who sought to eradicate black independence in the workplace, but it was not always possible to do so.<sup>56</sup> At the Freedmen's Court in Louisville, James Board testified during the summer of 1866 that his daughter, Emily, was "forced to work against her wish and without contract" on the farm of either James Cone or George W. Smith in Meade County. Board had already contacted the Superintendent of the Freedmen's Bureau in Louisville who had written to both Cone and Smith, but "no answer can be had from either of them." He would have simply traveled to Meade County and retrieved his daughter, Board further claimed, but he "believes and fears that he would endanger his life were he to attempt to go and see her." Without the assistance of the military court, Board doubted that he would be able to reclaim his fifteen year-old daughter from the men who had owned her as a slave and now refused to relinquish the young woman to her father.<sup>57</sup> The litany of violent crimes that Cone and Smith should have been charged with—from kidnapping and false imprisonment to threats against James Board's life—were the same machinations that white employers turned to time and again in order to challenge black autonomy in the workplace and establish that African Americans would be unable to control their own economic future.

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<sup>56</sup> See Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Marli Frances Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-80* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); and Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999 [1985]).

<sup>57</sup> Affidavit of James Board, July 31, 1866, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 119.

If Burriss' and Board's affidavits revealed anything, however, it was that black workers completely rejected the violent logic of the slaveholders. While Mayo, Cone, and Smith perpetrated a series of crimes aimed at reducing two families to complete dependence, the reality of emancipation and the elevation of African Americans to the status of free laborers had effected a fundamental transformation in postbellum life. It would have been nearly impossible for Burriss or Board to undertake the journey from the Kentucky countryside to Louisville under the institution of slavery—but the dictates of that regime no longer held sway. In the failed effort to resuscitate planter prerogatives, white employers purposefully utilized violence to destroy the free labor system and create something closer to slavery. The threat that white employers would “show you that you are not free” should be understood literally, and not simply as a rhetorical flourish meant to intimidate.<sup>58</sup> These efforts, it is clear, fell well short of their intended aim. Still, the difficulty that black workers had in confronting such violence should not be underestimated. For both Burriss and Board, there was little hope that either man could achieve redress through local authorities, and both were forced to travel to the Freedmen's Court in Louisville, a military tribunal that had limited enforcement powers in many rural areas of the Commonwealth. If they had not been able to trek to the Queen City, it is likely their testimony would have never been recorded. It is nearly certain that the vast majority of rural laborers who endured violence suffered in anonymity for this very reason. Thus, even as African Americans adopted an interpretation of free labor

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<sup>58</sup> See “Louisiana Former Slaveholder to the Freedmen's Bureau Agent at St. Joseph, Louisiana,” in *Freedom, Series III, Volume II*, 692.

premised on self-determination and control of their own persons, the reality of rural violence made the realization of that vision distressingly difficult.<sup>59</sup>

In contrast to rural labor violence, urban workplace violence occurred in new geographical, and demographical, settings that had been created through the process of emancipation.<sup>60</sup> Black Southerners who relocated to cities such as Louisville and New Orleans began to gather in new communities and to work at jobs that were physically separate from their domiciles. The main exception to this development were the domestic servants who worked in white homes while also renting rooms, but this was a vastly different arrangement in which servants expected privacy and could legitimately complain of offensive treatment. During Reconstruction, especially in its early years, the presence of federal troops and the proximity of the Freedmen's Bureau also provided another layer of protection that was often lacking for rural laborers. It was one thing to walk down the street to the local Bureau office, but quite another to undertake a dangerous journey across the state, and through unknown locations, under the nearly constant threat of physical violence.

Within the new geography of the urban South, black workers still had to overcome a great deal in order to become economically independent. The expanded opportunities of the urban environment were hardly unlimited, after all, and white employers were hardly reticent to resort to violence when they felt they needed to reassert

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<sup>59</sup> John C. Rodrigue has written extensively on this subject. See "Labor Militancy and Black Grassroots Political Mobilization in the Louisiana Sugar Region, 1865-1868," in *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (2001), pp. 115-145; and "'The Great Law of Demand and Supply': The Contest over Wages in Louisiana's Sugar Regions, 1870-1880," in *Agricultural History*, Vol. 72, No. 2, African Americans in Southern Agriculture: 1877-1945 (Spring, 1998), pp. 159-182.

<sup>60</sup> Howard Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Justin A. Nystrom, *New Orleans after the Civil War: Race, Politics, and a New Birth of Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); George C. Wright, *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985).

their power over the labor relationship. Frank Fields, an African American teen employed at a boarding house in Louisville, testified in April 1867 that his employer's family repeatedly assaulted him for accidents and minor mistakes. Although only fifteen years old, Fields claimed that "he has not heard from his Father or Mother for five years" and that he had contracted with William Woollett "at \$1.00 per week." "He had had no difficulty at the house," Fields continued, "and intended to remain...but a daughter of Mr. Woollett Mrs. Mary Woollett beat him over the head with a broom stick" for allowing a door to slam while carrying chairs from the parlor to the dining room. Such treatment was unacceptable to Fields, and he made the unilateral decision to demand his wages from the seven weeks he had worked and begin the search for new employment. After his employer refused his requests over the course of several days, Fields took his case to the Freedmen's Court. For their part, the Woollett family claimed that Fields had broken some glasses in the kitchen, but they settled with Fields to pay the balance that he was due at the insistence of the court.<sup>61</sup> Not every incident of urban workplace violence reached a similar conclusion, but due to their proximity to Bureau offices and the trappings of federal power, it was sometimes possible for urban workers to leverage their claims to workplace independence to their personal and material advantage.<sup>62</sup>

Fields' experience in Louisville highlights another important aspect of urban life for the freedmen: physical and social mobility. The young man could hardly claim to be

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<sup>61</sup> Affidavit of Frank Fields, April 4, 1867; "Notes of the Court," April 8, 12, 1867, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 120.

<sup>62</sup> The success of urban workers in successfully prosecuting such cases should not be overstated. More often than not, special circumstances such as the establishment of the Freedmen's Court in Louisville (and other cities throughout Kentucky) were the chief reasons that blacks were able to achieve redress. After the shuttering of the military courts throughout the South, African Americans had little hope that civil courts would provide justice. Nonetheless, even this modicum of protection was often entirely lacking in the rural South.

wealthy, and, apparently, he had lost touch with familial connections that might have provided economic support after he left his job at the Woollett's boarding house. Still, such hurdles were not as irreparably damaging as they might have been in the rural South. Fields, like many other African Americans, took advantage of the opportunity to move about freely in the urban setting and to seek employment where he could influence his own work experience and his body would be respected. It was also common for urban laborers to terminate labor relationships when white employers refused to promptly pay their wages—something that was uncommon in the rural South due to the timing of yearly labor contracts and clauses that withheld a large percentage of one's payment until the contract had been completed. In this sense, an urban employer often retained less leverage over an individual African American, both because of the comparative availability of other employment opportunities and the realization that workers risked losing smaller amounts of money if an employer could not be forced to pay.<sup>63</sup>

If laborers were unwilling to change jobs and prosecute employers in court to assert their economic independence, however, it was unlikely that workers would have received remuneration. In Louisville, Washington Dennis brought complaints to the Freedmen's Court in early 1867 that charged two employers with the violation of a labor contract, dismissal without cause, and refusal to pay wages. The details from the case demonstrate the lengths that black workers often had to go to in order to force whites to respect their rights within the employer-employee relationship. On April 15, Dennis

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<sup>63</sup> For an interesting examination of how the labor market developed in one urban setting in the decades after the Civil War, see David Sowell, "Racial Patterns of Labor in Postbellum Florida: Gainesville, 1870-1900," in *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (Apr., 1985), pp. 434-444. It is important to keep in mind what qualified for "urban" in the South during the nineteenth century. In 1860, Gainesville had a population of 269 people. By 1870 that number had increased to 1,444, however, and by 1900 the population had increased ten-fold since the start of the Civil War.

testified that three months earlier “he whitewashed the outside of the dwelling house and kitchen of Peter Flannery on the Portland Rail Road for five dollars, as per contract.” Despite Dennis’ frequent requests for payment, Flannery wholly refused to pay anything. After a further three months of evasion, Flannery’s wife finally appeared at court and promised to pay Dennis what he was due. On the same day as his first complaint, Dennis also swore out an affidavit against S.M. Jefferson in which he claimed that he was owed “\$1.75...for laying pavement and carrying bricks” at Jefferson’s home on Market Street.” At this court’s insistence, Jefferson appeared on May and settled the case for one dollar and fifty cents.”<sup>64</sup> It had taken Dennis six months to claim seven dollars. It was a testament both to Dennis’ determination to be treated as a free, independent laborer, and the reality of white employers’ efforts to retain their own sense of economic power.

The distinctions drawn here between rural and urban workplace violence, although important in understanding how white employers attempted to coerce and control African American laborers, were often difficult for individual black victims to discern. If extracting payment from violent employers remained the most common trial facing urban laborers, more extreme forms of racial violence proliferated as well. On November 3, 1868, for instance, James Mason and James Johnson, two African American shop owners living in Orleans Parish, Left Bank, reported that their business had been broken open, its contents destroyed, and shots fired into the premises. Neither Mason nor Johnson could identify their assailants, but the assault was devastating. They estimated

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<sup>64</sup> Affidavits of Washington Dennis, April 15, 1867; “Notes of the Court,” April 15, 16, 27, May 1, 4, 24, July 1, 1867; Receipt for Payment of Washington Dennis, May 1, 1867, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 120.

their losses to be \$350, at the least.<sup>65</sup> White employers, it was evident, brutalized their employees in both cities and the countryside, and although meticulous Bureau agents reported thousands of outrages committed against black workers, only so much could be done without more troops and tangible support from civil officials. Workplace violence, of course, could not force African American laborers to internalize the sense of dependence that white employers hoped to instill, but it could create a reality where the physical and psychological costs of remaining independent were so extraordinary that it might have seemed easier to simply accede to white demands. That black laborers did not take this route more often was clear proof of just how important economic autonomy and self-control were to African American conceptions of freedom.

From the grassroots, tens of thousands of black Southerners flooded Bureau offices with complaints of violent white employers—the sheer volume of which was a vibrant testimony to the belief that African American workers had won the right to define for themselves the nature of the employer-employee relationship.<sup>66</sup> Local and regional publications also extolled the close connection between free labor and personal autonomy. “The mode of labor on the plantations and the practical liberty of the freedmen are so intimately connected together,” the New Orleans *Tribune* editorialized in January 1865, “that each question must be considered in its bearing on the other.” For any appreciable transformation, radical changes were desperately needed:

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<sup>65</sup> “List of Murders and Other Outrages reported to Headquarters Bu. R. F. and A. Lands, District of Louisiana during the month of November 1868,” November 3, 1868, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 34.

<sup>66</sup> “Provost Marshal of Jefferson and Orleans Parishes (Right Bank), Louisiana, to the Louisiana Freedmen’s Bureau Assistant Commissioner,” in *Freedom, Series III, Volume I*, 703-704.

So long as the freedmen will remain under the control of the former planters and overseers, who had charge of them at the time that slavery existed...there will be no means of extending to the laborers the benefit of a true and practical liberty.

In the last few days of 1867, the *Tribune* continued to rail against planters and ex-Confederates who claimed to have the freedmen's best interest at heart. To "keep a man in the hardest bondage," the newspaper thundered, "to whip him, to put him in the stocks, to torture him, to undertake a gigantic war in order to better deprive him of his liberty and shorten his chains," were hardly the actions of a "tried friend."<sup>67</sup> They were, rather, tangible proof of a consuming desire among white Southerners to maintain their economic stranglehold on the black population. African Americans simply would not work under freedom, whites had convinced themselves, and employers meted out violence in an attempt to bend their employees to their will.

As the editors of the *Tribune* made clear in their commentary on the progress of Reconstruction, however, black workers were keenly aware that white employers had perpetrated an incessant campaign of racial terror aimed at forcing laborers into a subservient and dependent position in the workplace. Commentators on the ground reached similar conclusions. Frank Barclay, a free man of color living in New Orleans, wrote to Major General Nathaniel P. Banks in early 1863 and described the resistance of the former slaveholders to the introduction of free labor. "The rich planters, as far as I could see," Barclay began, "are those who seem to me to be the most strongly opposed to any proposition which would purport to take away from them even a particle of their former authority."<sup>68</sup> The near compulsive need for mastery that had animated the

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<sup>67</sup> New Orleans *Tribune*, January 28, 1865; December 21, 1867.

<sup>68</sup> "Louisiana Free Man of Color to the Commander of the Department of the Gulf," in *Freedom, Series I, Volume III*, 426-429.



slaveholders died hard—if it ever really did at all—during Reconstruction, and white employers guarded their “authority” with violence so as not to allow their workers a chance to best them under any circumstance.

By the conclusion of the Civil War, Bureau agents reported they had seen little change. In July 1865, Alex D. Baille reported from Port Hudson, Louisiana, that freedmen constantly visited his office to complain that planters refused to recognize their rights and pay honest wages. “The planters (many of them) do not recognize the rights of the negro in any way.” The planters, it seemed, were unable to grasp the new realities that emancipation had wrought:

Barrow...called and admitted that though he had poorly fed, not clothed or paid his negroes for four years, yet because he could not get full work out of Eight sick women, with children at the breach, laid them all down in a row and gave each twenty five lashes with a drivers whip. He thought it was all right, and understood from orders he had seen, that he had a right to do so.<sup>69</sup>

Lieutenant L.S. Butler, the Bureau Assistant Superintendent at Alexandria, Louisiana, discovered similar attitudes among white employers. Some of the planters “talk and act as though they were determined to get their [the freedmen’s] labor for nothing,” Butler commenced, “believing that they will ‘yet have them back as slaves.’”<sup>70</sup> It was an implacable position that was entirely untenable in the face of black determination to establish self-sufficiency in the workplace.

Few incidents revealed the persistence of white aspirations for mastery in the economic realm more clearly than the conflict between Nathan Hodges and James Keener. In November 1868, Hodges, a freedman living in Claiborne Parish, Louisiana,

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<sup>69</sup> Captain Alex D. Baille to Thomas W. Conway, July 20, 1865, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 7.

<sup>70</sup> L.S. Butler to Thomas W. Conway, July 10, 1865, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 7.

claimed that Keener, his former employer, had driven Hodges from his land, taken his crop, and threatened that he would “not be permitted to return unless he submits to a punishment of 100 lashes.”<sup>71</sup> Such a punishment would have been brutal and extended, but it was clear that Keener believed that this whipping would inflict more than physical pain on Hodges. Although the white employer had forcibly evicted Hodges for some unspecified transgression, Keener was willing to repair the employer-employee relationship and restore his wages if Hodges returned and admitted his subservience and dependence by agreeing to be whipped one hundred times. For James Keener, quite clearly, the ability to control free laborers like they were enslaved was of the utmost importance in crafting a dependent labor force. To freedmen like Nathan Hodges, however, submitting to violent punishment was entirely inconsistent with their interpretation of free labor.

Given the constant struggle between white employers and black employees that African Americans reported, it was little wonder that the New Orleans *Tribune* felt compelled to illuminate its readers on the nature of “free labor” in the South. Comparing the transition from servitude to freedom with monarchical succession—“The king is dead; long live the king”—the *Tribune* exclaimed that the custom of slavery had simply been “retained under a different form.” “The dynasty of slavery is still existing,” the editors wrote, we “want a new reform before republican freedom takes the place of monarchical servitude.” Their main complaint was that governmental regulations meant to mitigate disagreements between planters and laborers grossly infringed on the

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<sup>71</sup> “List of Murders and Other Outrages reported to Headquarters Bu. R. F. and A. Lands, District of Louisiana during the month of November 1868,” November 11, 1868, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 34.

freedmen's contractual rights. The "free laborer" of Louisiana, they claimed, had to request a pass from a federal official, often denied, that permitted them to seek employment at a specific plantation, but even then only at wages that were capped by the government—first rate "hands" earning \$10 per month. Their mobility thus restricted and true liberty denied, the editors concluded that for the freedmen "there is there—in that 'free labor' system—an unmistakable remnant of slavery."<sup>72</sup>

On New Year's Eve 1867, as the freedmen prepared to make contracts for the coming year, the *Tribune* opined that the planters and their friends "did not wish to see slavery abolished as a whole; they wanted to save some part of that system, and they opposed to the last that liberty be given to the laborer." From that reluctance "sprung forth a bastard regime, which is not slavery with its shames and miseries, but which is not the civilized regime of freedom of labor." The editors continued: "The great object of our planters in upholding the contract system is not simply to hold the laborer in their grasp; it is also to monopolize all the good hands among themselves."<sup>73</sup> In their efforts achieve that level of control, white employers threatened violence against any workers that might challenge white authority. In July 1865, the Louisville *Union Press* clamored that African American workers were becoming acquainted with the vengeance of returned rebels who threatened "that they will all be reduced to bondage again so soon as armed national authority shall have been removed." As a consequence, the freedmen were driven from the plantations where they worked, in the process breaking the labor contracts that they had signed. According to the Louisville *Democrat*, the ex-Confederates were simply engaged in "sloughing the negro population." Furthermore,

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<sup>72</sup> New Orleans *Tribune*, April 9, 1865.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, December 31, 1867.

the newspaper exclaimed that “niggers won’t work except in slavery,” and “that emancipation renders imminent and next to inevitable a war of the races.”<sup>74</sup> A race war was certainly not “inevitable,” of course, but some sort of conflict surely was. With white employers bent on coercing free laborers like they were enslaved, and black workers unwaveringly committed to establishing economic autonomy, there was little common ground on which employers and employees might meet.

When Jacob Burgest returned to New Orleans in September 1866 and recounted his travails in Rapides Parish to the editors of the New Orleans *Tribune*, he did so with the hope that his experience might better prepare black laborers to navigate the violent workplaces of the postbellum South. As Burgest—and many others—had already discovered, white employers sought to manipulate and leverage black employees into dependent labor relationships that made black mobility and economic advancement nearly impossible. While shady labor contracts and questionable practices such as apprenticeship were an integral part of these efforts, the commitment of African American laborers to securing a form of free labor premised on personal control and self-sufficiency severely undercut white aspirations to continued dominance in the workplace. It must have been a shocking revelation for J.G. Colvit when Burgest simply announced his desire to leave Rapides Parish and return to his home state of Missouri, and it would have been an even greater shock when Burgest requested that the Freedmen’s Bureau intervene on his behalf to remove the former Union soldier from his unenviable predicament. It was a reality that countless other white employers would face throughout Reconstruction and beyond as black laborers asserted, time and time again, that they

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<sup>74</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, July 29, 1865.

would do everything in their power to control their economic destiny—no matter the violence, no matter the cost.

### Chapter 3 — “If you do attempt to bild this house agane...”: Violence and the African American Home

On February 22, 1866, John Moltimore Howser traveled from Spencer County to the Freedmen’s Court in Louisville, Kentucky, to swear out an affidavit. At 32 years of age, Howser had been a free man for just under two months, having been emancipated on Christmas Day, 1865, by the Thirteenth Amendment. His former owner, also named John Howser, sent a letter with the freedman affirming that he “had been a faithful servant” and that “he was entirely honest and considered so by both white and black.” In return for these years of service, John Moltimore Howser confirmed that his former master “offered me to work under him for wages, or to lease to me a piece of land as I might prefer. I decided to lease some land from him.” All told, Howser acquired twenty acres of land that he was to clear and have as his own, rent free, for three years. “I at once started to labor on this land & to build a house for my self & family.” In a matter of weeks Howser had built everything “up to the roof.” Alas, amidst the promise of early Reconstruction in Kentucky, Howser would soon find its peril. Returning early one morning to finish his new home, Howser discovered that during the night it had been torn down and set on fire. The construction was in ruins. As Howser bluntly put it, “I found it burnt to ashes.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Howser to Freedmen’s Bureau, February 19, 1866; Affidavit of John Moltimore Howser, February 22, 1866, in Records of the Field Offices of the State of Kentucky, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872, Record Group 105, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, National Archives Microfilm Publication M1904 (hereafter cited as Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1904), reel no. 120.

Although devastated by the destruction of his creation, Howser was not entirely surprised. As he reported to the Freedmen's Court, a number of neighboring white men had been outspoken against his presence in the area as a free man. "Jack Creighton & Henry Martin...talked in the neighborhood against allowing me to settle there," Howser swore, and "Creighton came to me and said he had no objections to myself but he did not want my house so near to him."<sup>2</sup> Another white man, identified by Howser by the last name of Calloway, stated "to my late master Mr. Howser, that my house should not be built there as he did not fancy nigger quarters so close to him." The aforementioned Creighton and Martin, along with one William Brown, finally decided to start a petition "to see who in the neighborhood would agree to throwing my house down." Vocal in their threats, Creighton and his accomplices became eerily silent after Howser's home had been destroyed. "One Mr. Rhodes, living close by," Howser commented, "told me he had seen it on fire between midnight & morning...[but] I could learn nothing about who had done it, only that said Jack Creighton often declared that he would not allow a nigger's house so close to his."<sup>3</sup>

Not easily cowed by such terrorism, Howser decided to try again. "I at once started to rebuild my house," he reported. "I had got so far as to have it roofed in, and part Chinked." The local white terrorists struck yet again. For the second time in a few weeks, Howser's home was burnt to the ground. A local white man named Alick Brown

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<sup>2</sup> On the importance of personal networks and social "credit" in the antebellum South, see Laura F. Edwards, *The People and Their Peace: Legal Culture and the Transformation of Inequality in the Post-Revolutionary South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). Edwards argued that, at least in certain locales and neighborhoods, an individual's reputation allowed people without much legal status—mainly women and the enslaved—to claim protections where none were allowed by law. Although Howser's status had been revolutionized by emancipation, it was apparent that local whites did not object to his personal residence in the neighborhood, only that they did not agree with Howser's plan to establish an autonomous home located near to their own.

<sup>3</sup> Affidavit of John Moltimore Howser, February 22, 1866, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 120.

immediately fell under suspicion, and Howser testified to the Court that two friendly whites had confided in him that Brown “had offered to pull my house down for \$5.” Still, Howser could prove little. The same Mr. Rhodes who had witnessed Howser’s home in flames the first time confirmed only that he “had seen no one about, but he thought he heard some one run away from the burning house.” The only evidence left behind was an ominous warning that the marauders tacked to a stump near the burnt house:

molt you god damd black soun of abich if you do attempt to bild this hous agane you will be shot through your god damd hart and the first god damd man ses any thing aganst it will be served the same way or adamd site worse

However resolute Howser might have been, he was no fool. “I did not attempt to build a house the third time,” he stated to the court. “I was compelled to leave the place. I was afraid to attempt to make a living there after such treatment. I had plenty white friends there—but they were averse to help me as they were afraid they might get hurt themselves.”<sup>4</sup>

As Howser’s travails illustrate, racial violence directed against the African American home was fundamentally different from the violence of military enlistment or the workplace. In the latter two spaces, white Southerners resorted to violence to limit black mobility and undercut the ability of black workers to control their own labor. Black homes, however, were targeted because they represented black autonomy and self-reliance that leveled social distinctions between whites and blacks. This chapter contends

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* For the text of the death threat, see “Anonymous Warning to a Kentucky Freedman, and Affidavit of the Freedman,” in *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867, Series III, Volume II, Land and Labor, 1866-1867*, ed. Rene Hayden et al. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 902-904.



that independent households became symbolic of black freedom and provided spaces where black families could redefine the meaning of “home” and articulate notions of black masculinity and femininity in the wake of emancipation. Recognizing the importance of the home to black families, white terrorists assaulted these households both to police local racial boundaries and to deny that black men and women had any claims to traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. By forcing black men to tear down their own creations, literally emasculating them, and sexually assaulting black women in their own homes, violating both their persons and their claims to protection in their households, white Southerners pressed the claim that only white people could legitimately lay claim to the sanctity, and protection, afforded men and women within the household space.

The “home” and the “household” were concepts undergoing rapid transition in African American society during the early years of freedom. Under the slave regime, families often transcended the structural home, as most could not live together in the same physical space.<sup>5</sup> With emancipation, families were able to unite under a single roof. For these black Southerners, the home served as a physical construction that signified their corporeal freedom, but it was also an important place where gender roles could be defined and black men might lay claim to the status and rights that came with being the

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<sup>5</sup> The literature on the slave family is immense. For works that have fundamentally influenced my thinking, see John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976); John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) and Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

head of the household.<sup>6</sup> In a very real sense, the creation of autonomous black homes should be seen as an effort on the part of the freedmen to claim the right to have their family and their household coexist in the same space. Phrased in a slightly different manner, the household and the home place were both tangible and symbolic representations of black freedom. The nails, boards, bricks, beds, and other assorted goods that comprised the physical structure bestowed status on individuals and families, and served as a repository of other material goods and personal belongings that were associated with freedom and independence.<sup>7</sup> If even the sturdiest edifice cannot repel every intruder, for blacks, as for other Americans, the household still signified a supposedly safe space removed from the evils of the outside world where one's family might find peace and security. The physical and psychological separation from the conditions of slavery, therefore, both came to be represented in the African American household.

If most black Southerners aspired to home ownership, many fell well short of achieving such status. On the plantations, free agricultural laborers often rented cabins and rooms from their former masters. Domestic servants in urban locations also found that their wages would only permit them to board in apartments or bedrooms with other laborers. In some situations, individuals continued living in households with extended kinship networks as had often been the case during slavery.<sup>8</sup> If these physical dwellings

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<sup>6</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999 [1985]), 158-160, 183-185.

<sup>7</sup> On the importance of property and kinfolk before and after emancipation, see Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> The complaints that freedmen lodged to the Freedmen's Bureau and civilian officials regularly identified the people, and the associated relationships, with whom they lived. See Affidavit of David Beeler, May 31, 1866, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 119.

were reminiscent of those occupied while enslaved, black Southerners nonetheless imbued them with entirely different meanings after emancipation. Slaveholders had often claimed the right to enter black homes with impunity, but white landlords were hardly able to exercise the same level of control.<sup>9</sup> As such, the freedmen viewed their rented apartments and rooms as spaces that were their own and should serve as a means of protection from the outside world. Much as more materially prosperous African Americans were able to do in their single-family dwellings, then, renters collapsed the corporeal and intangible aspects of family and household into a singular understanding of the “home.”<sup>10</sup> As obvious as this transition seems in hindsight, it would revolutionize Southern society during the postbellum era.

For John Howser and countless other African Americans, therefore, home place violence was devastating both physically and emotionally. Most striking in Howser’s affidavit was the notion that the destruction of his house had obliterated his conception of where his home truly was. Having lived his entire life in Spencer County—something that Howser specifically made note of before the Court—it had seemed a foregone conclusion that his life as a free man would continue amongst the people and places he

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<sup>9</sup> In regards to the black family, this practice of the slaveholders often had sexual connotations and involved the sexual assault and rape of black women. See Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> It was common for whites in the postbellum South to lay claim to black children by declaring them apprentices. To do so, many former slaveholder argued that they could better provide for the children, at least materially, than the mother, father, or other family member just emerging from slavery. The most infamous examples of this were the “black codes” that former Confederate states passed after the Civil War. See Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1871* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 201-202. Although Kentucky did not leave the Union, former slaveholders in the Bluegrass State employed similar practices to retain the services of African American children. For an example of how these disputes played out during Reconstruction, see Affidavit of Eliza Brooks, October 26, 1866, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 119.

had known his entire life. Although Howser did not admit it to the Court, it is safe to assume that nearly every person he knew lived in his home county. The attachment to one's home is often difficult to describe, yet it is undeniable that Howser's words drip with the emotions of a man who has just had everything recognizable about his life shattered in front of his eyes.

Perhaps even worse than the burning of his house and the threat against his life was the fact that Howser believed that his "friends" were entirely incapable of helping him because of the danger to their own lives. If the individuals whom Howser knew and trusted—his world, in a very real sense—could not and would not help him, then who would? Howser certainly felt alone as he struggled to survive the first weeks and months of his freedom, and the violence he was forced to endure further alienated him from anyone who might have otherwise offered assistance. His house in ruins, his family at great risk, and his sense of belonging in the world destroyed, Howser trekked to the Freedmen's Bureau because he had nowhere else to turn. He had been "compelled" to leave his home, he reported. He was "scared" and alone, and he had been promised death if he returned to the place where he had lived every day of his life.

Across the postbellum South autonomous black households became targets of racial violence. Linked to both freedom and independence, African American homes were physical spaces where black men and women took control of their social and economic future. Importantly, they were also sites that defined a new found sense of self-sufficiency and sovereignty for black Southerners, as these households were commonly established in places where whites had not traditionally controlled the enslaved population. Much of the violence directed against black homes, therefore,

aimed at regulating where black households were being constructed. Writing from Bienville Parish in northwestern Louisiana in August 1866, Captain Napoleon Blanton reported to his superiors in New Orleans that black homes in the area were outraged on a nightly basis.<sup>11</sup> In some cases this violence was random, but African Americans often testified that they personally knew the white people who had attacked them.

In a series of statements that Blanton enclosed in his report, several freedmen believed they could identify at least some of the men who had attacked the home of Green Jones on the night of the thirteenth of August. Jones himself would not swear that he knew all of his assailants, but he alleged that “Rob’t and John Carr were among them almost certain they were....I can’t say whether Mr Reagers [Jones’ former master who had leased him some land] had any hand in whipping us or not.” John Gordon, a freedmen employed by Jones who had also been assaulted, was more leery of the former slaveholder. According to Gordon, John Reager “was the cause and knew all about the whipping of us.” Jones’ house was only three hundred yards from that of Reager, Gordon claimed, who “could not help but hear us hollow for we were heard two miles.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The refusal of state courts to prosecute violent whites, and the insistence among local populations that violent perpetrators should not be brought to justice, were some of the most consistent challenges facing Bureau agents. At one time or another, most federal officials reported to their superiors that they were entirely unable to rely on civilian officials and that successful prosecution of white terrorists would require federal intervention—and often military force. The situation could become so dire, in fact, that in some instances African Americans and white Unionists refused federal assistance for fear that they would face intense retaliation once the troops were removed. For one example of these difficulties, see “Freedmen’s Bureau Chief Superintendent for the District of Kentucky to the Headquarters of the Kentucky and Tennessee Freedmen’s Bureau Assistant Commissioner,” in *Freedom, Series II, The Black Military Experience*, eds., Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie P. Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 761-762. A number of studies of the Freedmen’s Bureau and black freedom have also emphasized the difficulties facing federal officials. For two works that have influenced my thinking, see Howard A. White, *The Freedmen’s Bureau in Louisiana*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970); and John David Smith, *We Ask Only for Even-Handed Justice: Black Voices from Reconstruction* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> “Statement of a Louisiana Freedman,” in *Freedom, Series III, Volume II*, ed. Rene Hayden et al., 926-928. The spelling in these documents is wildly inconsistent. I have standardized names, unless in quotations, to provide consistency for the reader.

The “whipping” that both men described was brutal and extended. As Jones testified, “I was waked up by some men shooting into my house. I jumped up and tried to get away but they caught me and threatened to blow my brains out if I moved an inch.” One freedman, Felix Dixon, managed to escape, but Jones, Gordon, and Henry Clay were taken nearly twenty yards outside the home and whipped repeatedly. The white men “whipped Gordon first,” Jones continued, “then they pulled my shirt over my head and made me lay down on the ground two of them stood on my head and arms and they whipped me with a leather strap fastened to a stick. they must have given me about 300 lashes the cut me up badly and kicked me in the face.” John Gordon’s statement was very similar to Green’s. He too alleged that the attackers “gave me about 300 lashes” as part of the sadistic beating. When they were finished, the white men made sure that the freedmen knew why they had been targeted. “They said after they was done whipping me,” Gordon reported, “to go back to my old master, and mind him and not leave home without a pass, that we would be made slaves of again and that they would kill me if I ever reported them to that d—d Yankee Captain at Sparta.”<sup>13</sup>

The local terrorists conveyed a related message to Jones, although he recalled what they had said in slightly more detail:

When they were through they asked me if I could be obedient to every little white child and would call every white man and woman Master and Mistress and raise my hat to every white man I met and never leave home without a pass. They then told me I had to sell my horses, that they would not allow negroes to have horses. that must get into some white man’s yard for protection. That they would not allow negroes to live off to themselves. They said they would be round once a week.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

Quite clearly, the beating that Jones and the other freedmen suffered was closely related to their efforts to establish a degree of autonomy in their personal lives. As the white men's threats made apparent, the freedmen could expect protection if they returned and lived under the watchful gaze of their former owners. That is, they would only be safe if they agreed to voluntarily forego their claims to independence that their homes represented. Even more than this, the white men's actions challenged the notion of black freedom by declaring that the adult freedmen must forsake their manhood and meekly admit that small white children were their social superiors and purported masters.<sup>15</sup> Anything that elevated Jones and his companions above the level of complete dependence and subservience, in other words, would have to be abandoned if they wished to live peacefully in the area. Their message, such as it was, would have been impossible to miss.

From the accounts of John Howser, Green Jones, and several other freedmen, we can begin to make some evaluations regarding everyday racial violence and the African American home. It is undeniable that black households were attacked because they were both tangible and symbolic representations of African American independence. When Jack Creighton torched John Howser's home, he destroyed both the physical structure and Howser's sense of sanctuary in Spencer County. As the threats that Howser reported

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<sup>15</sup> A large majority of white Southerners, of course, championed the notion that African Americans should accept that they occupied subservient roles in American society despite emancipation. In this sense, violent terrorism simply reinforced standing cultural assumptions, and even those whites that did not personally take part in such violence accepted that it might be necessary to maintain white supremacy. In August 1867, for instance, the *Lexington Observer & Reporter* noted that biracialism was impossible because of the supposed ineptitude and inferiority of blacks: "Kentucky has learnt wisdom from this experiment with the African. She will do all in her power to prevent this race from exercising any power whatever in this State. We want a white man's State...and we intend to have it." For an excellent explication of the constellation of ideas that composed "white supremacy," see Stephen Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman & the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

had made clear, the would-be white terrorists had no issues with Howser remaining in the neighborhood as long as he lived under the supervision of his former master.

Establishing an independent household, however, would not be tolerated. Importantly, the available testimony also reveals how violence against the home could precipitously escalate from threats and verbal confrontations to forced eviction and, eventually, murder. Howser watched this unfold over the course of several months, and Green Jones and other freedmen in Bienville Parish testified that they had been warned that future attacks would become progressively more violent if they did not give up the hope of securing a home place that they could call their own.

The most frequent form of household violence was verbal or written threats. With this approach, whites attempted to frighten blacks by promising that they would suffer severe consequences if they did not vacate their land and homes. R.E. Johnston, superintendent of the Lexington, Kentucky, branch of the Freedmen's Bureau, reported in late 1866 that it was extremely common for whites to threaten to drive the freedmen from their homes. When verbal threats were not enough, Johnston noted that white Kentuckians sometimes forcibly evicted blacks and claimed their property for themselves. As an example, Johnston noted that Thornton Burke and William Dick, two freedmen who had purchased land in Fayette County, were forced off their land in July 1866 by a "group of whites" who subsequently sold the property to whites in the area.<sup>16</sup> In some instances, white men who allowed freedmen to rent land were also targeted. In West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, in January 1867, a freedmen presented a Bureau agent with an ominous note that had been given to a local white planter:

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<sup>16</sup> R.E. Johnston to John Ely, November 5, 1866, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 17.



...Ben White Did you hear what happened to Joe Rider last year. if not I let you know that his cribs & corn was burned & we threatened to hang him. what for, because he was colonizing negroes. you sir are now at the same thing.... if you do not ship them within ten days, we will burn every building on your land & hang you & there you will hang until the buzzards eat you....remember Sir & clean them out or you will be shipped for hell & your family left houseless—

Such notices were becoming common, the freedmen reported, but other landowners had not come forward because they feared for their lives and property.<sup>17</sup>

If verbal threats convinced African Americans to abandon their homes, Southern whites often refrained from employing physical violence.<sup>18</sup> For those African Americans like Howser and Jones that refused to be cowed by what they hoped were empty promises, however, whites rarely hesitated to use more deadly force. Typical was a request Elijah Ash sent to the Freedmen's Bureau in late 1866. A former Union soldier, Ash had purchased five acres of land from his former owner and built a house where his mother could reside comfortably. According to Ash, his white neighbor, John Carr, had informed him that "Mac Hinkle son of old Hinkle" and a company of white men "were going to burn the place down as soon as they got it all built up." Surely, Ash pleaded, there must be something the Bureau could do to protect him.<sup>19</sup> Reports of black men called from their homes to receive whippings and beatings from whites were also numerous. Near Lexington, R.E. Johnston reported in November 1866 that he had received "six reports of Freedmen taken out of their houses and whipped and ordered to leave the county."<sup>20</sup> If everything else failed, it was an all too common occurrence for

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<sup>17</sup> "Anonymous Warning to a Louisiana Landowner," in *Freedom, Series III, Volume II*, ed. Rene Hayden et al., 952.

<sup>18</sup> Kidada E. Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (New York: University Press, 2012), 226n20.

<sup>19</sup> Levi F. Burnett to Freedmen's Bureau, November 14, 1866, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 13.

<sup>20</sup> R.E. Johnston to John Ely, November 5, 1866, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 17.

recalcitrant whites to ultimately resort to murder.<sup>21</sup> Understanding home invasions in the context of this “continuum” of violence is crucial if we are to discover how deeply embedded fears of household attacks were in daily life. The home, often a powerful image of familial safety and sanctity, became yet another contested space for African Americans in the postbellum South where violence lurked around every corner.<sup>22</sup>

Home place violence during Reconstruction was also alarmingly familiar. One of the enduring myths of the post-Civil War era is that Southern racial violence was commonly random terrorism that spun out of control. Such an interpretation has been shaped by an emphasis on spectacle lynching and the politically-charged violence of the Ku Klux Klan—and, then, explained as part of an all-encompassing effort to enforce white racial supremacy.<sup>23</sup> By far, however, most African American victims of home

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<sup>21</sup> Throughout its existence, the Freedmen’s Bureau regularly kept track of “outrages” committed against African Americans. These could be anything from verbal threats to murder, but more often than not Bureau agents reported the most heinous crimes that were perpetrated in their sub-district. Many of these reports carry detailed descriptions of local conditions and relate how extraordinary acts of violence originated from smaller, more mundane confrontations that occurred on a daily basis. For a sample of the violence that the freedmen endured and an example of the Bureau’s record-keeping, see Louisiana Assistant Commissioner, “Murders & Outrages from May 10/68 to Dec 15/68,” in Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Louisiana, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869, Record Group 105, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, National Archives Microfilm Publication M1027 (hereafter cited as Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1027), reel no. 34.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me*, 9-13.

<sup>23</sup> The literature on racial violence from the Civil War to the end of the nineteenth century is vast. For some works that have influenced my thinking, see Stephen V. Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis: The Race Riot that Shook the Nation One Year after the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013); James K. Hogue, *Uncivil War: Five New Orleans Street Battles and the Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011); George C. Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984); Eric Foner, *Reconstruction*; Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Aaron Astor, *Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012); James Michael Rhyne, “Rehearsal for Redemption: The Politics of Post-Emancipation Violence in Kentucky” (PhD diss., University of Cincinnati, 2007); Ted Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism, and Race in Louisiana, 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984); Joe Gray Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed, 1863-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974); Justin A. Nystrom, *New Orleans after the Civil War: Race, Politics, and a New Birth of Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995); Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Iron Confederacies: Southern Railways,*

place racial violence in the postbellum South personally knew their attackers. John Howser and Green Jones testified as to the identity of the white men who had assaulted them, something that was extremely common. Consider also the experience of Mary Wilson. According to an affidavit sworn out in June 1865, Wilson had been illegally and forcibly removed from her home in Lexington, Kentucky, towards the end of the previous month by two policemen who carried her to the home of her former master. Three miles outside the city, down the Newtown Pike, the three white men tied Wilson to “a Slaughter house...rafter or beam and with a leathern buggy trace [and] inflicted upon her naked body a severe beating and bruising.” Six days later, the same men arrested her without cause and confined Wilson to the city prison before again removing her to the residence of her former master where she was stripped and beaten. In her affidavit, sworn at Camp Nelson, Wilson had no trouble identifying her attackers: policemen Downey and Mason, and her former owner, William Adams.<sup>24</sup>

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*Klan Violence, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Lou Falkner Williams, *The Great South Carolina Ku Klux Klan Trials, 1871-1872* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996); Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Carole Emberton, *Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South after the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); LeeAnna Keith, *The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror, and the Death of Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Elaine Frantz Parsons, *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan During Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black/White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Crystal Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and “Legal Lynchings”* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); Stewart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Michael Ayers Trotti, “What Counts: Trends in Racial Violence in the Postbellum South,” *Journal of American History* 100 (Sept., 2013), pp. 375-400.

<sup>24</sup> “Affidavit of a Kentucky Black Soldier’s Wife,” in *Freedom, Series I, Volume I, The Destruction of Slavery*, ed. Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 623-624. The claim that most black victims personally knew their attackers is based on extensive research in the collections of the Freedmen’s Bureau and is

African American victims who were unafraid to point their finger at individual whites who had attacked them often did so with the understanding that such an act could put them at greater risk of white reprisal. The threat of randomized violence is certainly debilitating, but it is decidedly different from the devastation of violence at the hands of those one personally knows. Even more terrifying for blacks in the postbellum South was the knowledge that obtaining justice for oneself was an incredibly difficult prospect that only placed the victim in greater peril.<sup>25</sup>

In Mary Wilson's affidavit sworn out in June 1865, she testified that she had presented her story to the military authorities in Lexington on the same day, May 31, that the policemen had committed the home invasion and administered the first beating. The refusal of the authorities to act or provide any "redress for the said wrongs and outrages inflicted upon her body" had led directly to the second assault—and, subsequently, to her trip to Camp Nelson as part of Wilson's ongoing effort to obtain justice. The repeated physical attacks that Wilson endured, however, were only part of the story. In her testimony, she specifically identified herself as the "lawful wife" of Lewis Wilson, at the time serving in the 119<sup>th</sup> Regiment U.S.C.T. Under the laws of "Congress," Wilson knew that she and her family were "entitled to...freedom." And yet, her former master

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supported by black testimony and reports issued by federal officials. The common assertion that a crime had been committed by "parties unknown" was simply a tactic utilized by civilian officials to maintain plausible deniability in the face of federal pressure to prosecute whites who had committed violent actions against black Southerners.

<sup>25</sup> The fear of white reprisal was an urgent concern for black Southerners in the early years of freedom. Isaac S. Hubbs, a member of the American Missionary Association, described in some detail the difficulties facing the freedmen in Louisiana in the immediate aftermath of emancipation. According to Hubbs, "They are maltreated and defrauded on many plantations—particularly by the old overseers and drivers. They are abused by Northern men they are murdered by our soldiers—thrown out of Provost Marshals office, in the bayou parishes, and into prison for simply entering complaint, robbed by the jailors & thrust out mercilessly when they have been frightened into silence. They are between the upper and nether millstone." See Hubbs to Revs. Jocelyn and Whipple, January 8, 1864, in American Missionary Association Archives, 1828-1969, Box 58, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

remained able to violate the sanctity of her home, all the while refusing to free her son, Richard, and return the boy to his mother's possession. The nation's armies had taken her husband, and then neglected to act as his home and household was split asunder by violence. For Mary Wilson and countless others, living with everyday violence in the postbellum South meant living alongside people that you knew had assaulted, beaten, and broken open your home—and being able to do very little about it.<sup>26</sup>

As part and parcel of a concerted assault on the sanctity of the black family, home place violence had enormous implications in regards to conceptions of gender in the postbellum South. When Southern whites attacked black households they emphatically denied that black men had any patriarchal rights to protect their wives and families. The domestic space was an important marker of freedom and self-reliance for Southerners, and the intrusion into this protected sphere revealed a great deal about the “gendered political culture” of the postbellum South.<sup>27</sup> If white men drew their own prerogatives from their place within the family structure, the violation of the black home symbolically, and physically, stripped black men of the same aspirations. It was no coincidence that freedmen were attacked in their homes and forcefully removed from them to be whipped and beaten—and even killed—on a regular basis. Attacks on autonomous black homes occurred nearly every day across the South, perpetrated by nightriders and other angry whites, and they began nearly as soon as the war was over. The rationale behind such assaults is not difficult to discern. On one hand, independent black households presented

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<sup>26</sup> “Affidavit of a Kentucky Black Soldier’s Wife,” in *Freedom, Series I, Volume I*, 623-624.

<sup>27</sup> Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 190, 220. For an examination of the household as a space where white male Southerners defined their masculinity and “prerogatives,” see Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, & the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

an urgent problem to white men because of the ways in which they revolutionized antebellum social relations. A master had always had access to his slaves' quarters, and for most whites such social domination was hard to relinquish. On the other hand, the penetrability of black homes reinforced perceived racial differences due to the continued sanctity of the white household. Such distinctions were of deathly importance to Southern whites attempting to adjust to the realities of the postbellum world.<sup>28</sup>

The forcible removal of black men from their homes was an exceptionally common occurrence in the postbellum South, and it served as a potent reminder that white men simply refused to acknowledge or accept the legitimacy of black manhood and masculinity. Studies of Reconstruction often note the brutality of the Deep South, and Louisiana in particular, but incidents of home place violence in Kentucky were markedly similar to those in the cotton states. In April 1867, a report reached Bureau offices in Louisville that noted that Henry Boone had made a complaint to the agent in Bardstown in regards to an outrage committed on his person. According to Boone, he had been called from his home one night during March "and shot at by two men." The following morning, Boone tracked the men to the home of a white neighbor named Barnes who informed Boone that he knew who had attacked the freedman, but that he "would not tell on them."<sup>29</sup> Often, the threat of eviction or removal was just as powerful as the act itself.

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<sup>28</sup> Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 189-191. In the antebellum South, the home was the space where white men defined themselves as patriarchs and masters. Through their domestic mastery, in turn, white men claimed both citizenship and political power in the public setting. Enslaved men could hardly claim such domestic rights, and assaults on independent black households after emancipation symbolically attacked a new and important identifier of freedom and equal citizenship. See also Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Peter Winthrop Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

<sup>29</sup> Report of Thomas O'Neal, "Henry Boone vs assailants," April 1867, in Freedmen's Bureau NA M1904, reel no. 119.

In January of the same year, Abraham Riley claimed that three white men threatened him on his return to his home in Oldham County that no “Damned Blue Coat Nigger should live there, that either I or they must leave the place.” Riley continued, they “said that none of Abe Lincoln’s free niggers could stay there and that I must go into a free state.” That Kentucky was then a free state seems to not have troubled the three would-be terrorists: “They said they would burn my house and drive my family away. I have not left Lefranchise [in Oldham County], but am afraid these men will come and drive me off.”<sup>30</sup>

Conditions in Louisiana were eerily similar. Bureau agent William Stokes reported from Claiborne Parish in September 1868 that “there is a spirit of brutality and terror reigning throughout the parish.” Freedmen in the area lived in constant danger, Stokes claimed, and black homes and private land ownership had ceased to provide even a modicum of protection for black men and their families. The removal of black men from their homes and the unlawful eviction of entire families had become so common, in fact, that Stokes estimated that freedmen were being driven out of the parish on a “daily” basis. The result of such violence was that freedpeople were being forced to leave behind the product of their labor for the year, and any other earthly belongings that they could not carry with them as they fled in terror. These attacks were hardly carried out in secret or by whites who tried to remain anonymous. According to Stokes, freedmen continually complained to the civil authorities, but their requests were universally ignored. Instead of doing their duty, the authorities simply informed the white men who had been complained against. The consequences for area blacks were horrible: “Freedpeople are

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<sup>30</sup> “Affidavit of a Discharged Kentucky Black Soldier,” in *Freedom, Series II*, 808.

taken from their homes or stopped on the highway and then taken to the depth of some wood and whipped or shot.” For blacks in Claiborne Parish, the home had ceased to be a safe haven and a place of respite from the travails of the world. Whites in the area made certain that the pressure on the freedmen was violent and constant. “The freedmen are forced to leave the parish,” Stokes concluded, “or be in constant dread of being killed.”<sup>31</sup>

Removing black men from their homes was, ultimately, only one of a number of ways in which whites used home place violence to emasculate African American men throughout the postbellum period—but it was one of the most effective. In fact, forcing black men to leave their homes and submit to physical violence should be seen as a companion to violent actions whereby white men penetrated black homes. For black victims, both of these forms of violence would have caused such consternation because white terrorists forced African American men, by their actions, to participate in the ritual of violence itself. Because black masculinity became tied to autonomous black households, the inability to protect the home place thus became a major problem for individual victims. When African American men were unable to keep white men from forcing their way into the supposedly protected space of the black home, they became spectators to the violation of the space on which their manhood centered. Being called to leave their home and submit to a physical beating, or, more drastically, threatened to leave the immediate vicinity in order to save one’s life, was even more startling and enervating due to the onus that was placed on black men to move towards their own demise. When men like John Howser or Abraham Riley left their homes behind in order to protect themselves and their families, they quite literally walked away from the spaces

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<sup>31</sup> Louisiana Assistant Commissioner, “Murders & Outrages Reported from May 10/68 to Dec 15/68,” in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 34.



that had helped to make them men. It would be misleading to suggest that African American men internalized the gendered assumptions that white terrorism connoted, but such violence was a persistent reminder that black autonomy and masculinity, which emanated from the household, would be under constant threat.

Another common form of household violence was the appropriation of blacks' firearms, especially those owned by returning veterans.<sup>32</sup> Breaking into African American homes to disarm black men, at its core, was incontrovertible proof to the victims that they would not be allowed to protect the sanctity of their household. Thus, depriving African American men of guns became a central tenet of the violent campaigns that whites waged against independent black homes during Reconstruction. More than most other personal objects, guns were symbolic of freedom and self-reliance. For returning Union soldiers, gun ownership was also a tangible link to their experience in the army and a constant reminder of the role they had played in the liberation of the enslaved.<sup>33</sup> When whites appropriated weapons, and even destroyed them in the presence of their owner, it was a jarring reminder of the continuous assault against African

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<sup>32</sup> Emberton, *Beyond Redemption*, 149-152; Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, 40-41. A number of scholars have emphasized the importance of martial displays to freedpeople and their conceptions of freedom. See Rebecca Scott, "'Stubborn and Disposed to Stand Their Ground': Black Militia, Sugar Workers, and the Dynamics of Collective Action in the Louisiana Sugar Bowl, 1863-87," *Slavery and Abolition* 20, no. 1 (April 1999), pp. 103-126; John Rodrique, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001); Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*.

<sup>33</sup> Christian G. Samito, *Becoming American Under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship during the Civil War Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009). In his regional study of white militias in Kentucky during Reconstruction, Patrick Lewis has argued that returning black veterans became "apostles of freedom and citizenship." See Lewis, "The Democratic Partisan Militia and Black Peril: The Kentucky Militia, Racial Violence, and the Fifteenth Amendment, 1870-1873," in *Civil War History*, Volume 56, No. 2, (June 2010), pp. 146-147. For other works that describe a similar role for returning Union soldiers, see Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891* (Frankfort: The Kentucky Historical Society, 2003), 169, 176-177; Victor B. Howard, *Black Liberation in Kentucky: Emancipation and Freedom, 1862-1884* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 79-80; and Anne E. Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 93-94.

American autonomy. More immediately important for many African Americans was the realization that the loss of their rifle and pistols meant that they had lost one of the only proven means of home defense in the postbellum South. It was not only the symbolic power of guns that whites feared—for whenever blacks resisted white violence during Reconstruction, loaded firearms nearly always played an important role. The efforts of whites to disarm black men through attacks that centered on African American homes, therefore, was consistent with other efforts to enervate African American men within their own households.<sup>34</sup>

Disarmament further solidified these notions due to the close association between gun ownership and masculinity.<sup>35</sup> James Rice wrote to R.E. Johnston, superintendent of the Lexington, Kentucky, branch of the Freedmen's Bureau, in June 1866 to report that a group of white men arrived in his neighborhood on the night of June 9 and demanded entrance into the homes of the freedmen in order to seize "all the Yankee muskets" and "such other firearms as they might find." "In one case," Rice continued, "they took an Enfield rifle, the property of a returned soldier name Silas Crowder and broke it into fragments portions of which I saw."<sup>36</sup> In March of the same year, Jacob Johnson swore out an affidavit near Paducah, Kentucky, in which he claimed that "he was discharged from the U.S. Service on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of Feb'y 1866 and returned to his home at Columbus Ky on the 1<sup>st</sup> of March 1866 bringing with him his arms consisting of a U.S. musket purchased by him from the Govt and a pistol." Within a week, however, a man named Morton who was serving as a justice of the peace demanded that Johnson must

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<sup>34</sup> Emberton, *Beyond Redemption*, 262n18, 256n26.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-177.

<sup>36</sup> James Rice to R.E. Johnston, June 18, 1866, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 103.

relinquish his weapons if he were to remain in the area. Johnson declined to surrender his arms “until he had an opportunity to ascertain his rights in the premises,” but he noted that the authorities required “all discharged col’d soldiers...to surrender their arms to the civil officers at Columbus including the muskets purchased by them from the U.S. Gov’t.”<sup>37</sup>

The disarmament of black men—and even more pointedly the practice of entering the black household in order to confiscate potentially hidden weapons—stemmed from deep-seated desires within whites to deny black masculinity, but it was also a response to the consuming fear that whites held of armed African Americans. A group of Louisville blacks, agitated by the treatment they received from local whites and the non-existent protection of the civil authorities, angered whites when they began conducting military drills during the summer of 1869 at a local church. To whites in the city, the most disturbing element of this spectacle was the tendency of the blacks to brandish firearms. The Cincinnati *Commercial*, always quick to comment on affairs across the Ohio River, claimed, “Steps are being taken to ascertain whether their meetings are of a peaceful character, or warlike character. If the latter, they will be dispersed.”<sup>38</sup> In Louisiana, the sight of armed blacks travelling openly in Caddo and Bossier parishes in August 1868 was met with such alarm by white citizens and the local sheriff that the Bureau agent, Thomas Monroe, reported to superiors in New Orleans that he feared a full scale race riot would erupt. According to Monroe, white citizens complained that armed freedmen dared to use “threatening language” and even claimed that the freedmen would dictate what laws were observed in the parish. For white Southerners, this was a nightmare

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<sup>37</sup> “Affidavit of a Discharged Kentucky Black Soldier,” in *Freedom, Series II*, 804-805.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, 41.

come to life—and striking evidence that their world could turn upside-down if they relented for even a moment. For whites in the postbellum South, the act of everyday violence was urgent work.<sup>39</sup>

The cumulative effect of the violation of the African American home, disarmament, and white refusal to accept any signs of martial manhood from blacks is difficult to discern without examining the nature and structure of such violence on the everyday level.<sup>40</sup> Events in Opelousas, Louisiana, in 1868 and 1869 illustrate this quite clearly. Undoubtedly, the singular moment of violence in the small town in St. Landry Parish that has drawn the most historical attention was the Opelousas Massacre.<sup>41</sup> On the day of September 28, 1868, members of the Knights of the White Camelia confronted a group of black and white Republicans in the town—both sides were armed and feared that the simmering political tensions in the area would turn catastrophically violent. They were right. By the end of the frenzy, which lasted several days, the level of violence was astounding. Although estimates vary, some historians place the number of victims at around 150 or more, the vast majority of whom were black. For whites living in St. Landry Parish and bordering areas, the presence of armed blacks was certain evidence that the long anticipated war of the races had now commenced. The slaughter of

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<sup>39</sup> Louisiana Assistant Commissioner, “Murders & Outrages Reported from May 10/68 to Dec 15/68,” in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 34.

<sup>40</sup> On the topic of “martial manhood,” see McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, 261; Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Emberton, *Beyond Redemption*; Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 227-231.

<sup>41</sup> Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction*, 96, 156; Carolyn E. DeLatte, “The St. Landry Riot: A Forgotten Incident of Reconstruction Violence,” in *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Winter, 1976), pp. 41-49; James G. Dauphine, “The Knights of the White Camelia and the Election of 1868: Louisiana’s White Terrorists; a Benighting Legacy,” in *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Spring, 1989), pp. 173-190.

September 28 was an important cog in white efforts to dominate and oppress blacks in the parish, but it was only a part of the wave of terrorism that shaped black life in postbellum Louisiana. This exceptional violence—often identified strictly as political violence—was only the veneer that covered months and years of everyday violence that debilitated blacks, and friendly whites, living in rural areas such as Opelousas and across the state.<sup>42</sup>

Dispatched to Opelousas in early 1869, Captain Frank M. Cone of the Twenty-Fifth Colored Infantry regiment wrote to Captain George Baldey, stationed in New Orleans, in May to relate conditions in the parish. According to Cone, his “efforts thus far in eliciting information concerning the St. Landry riots [the Opelousas Massacre] and other disturbances” had met with “insuperable” difficulties. “Many persons cognizant of facts,” Cone continued, “are afraid to become informants, and not even the profoundest assurance of confidence, secrecy, and protection will induce them to incur the perils that overhang them.” The threats that Cone described were loosely political in nature, but only in the sense that blacks and Unionist whites were universally considered to be Republicans by white Democrats. Beyond this, the violence that Cone reported was entirely disconnected from the demands of the electoral calendar. Instead, Cone noted that “A formidable reign of terror has subdued the spirit of the people. Every true Union man is possessed with a dread of ultimate danger of life, family, & property should he

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<sup>42</sup> Nearly every historian that has examined Louisiana during Reconstruction has noted the shocking levels of racial violence in the state. For two recent studies, see Frank J. Wetta, *The Louisiana Scalawags: Politics, Race, and Terrorism during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012); Nystrom, *New Orleans after the Civil War*. Mark Wahlgren Summers and Douglas R. Egerton have both produced recent, stimulating accounts of Reconstruction that also highlight racial violence in the Pelican State. See Summers, *The Ordeal of the Reunion: A New History of Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

betray a thought or act of Republican fellowship.” Certainly, white terrorists in Opelousas and across the South were active during an election cycle, but the threat of daily violence and the violation of the haven of the home were just as effective at suppressing black autonomy. “I have never seen in my continuous experience in reconstruction duty,” Cone reported, “a class of people in whom manhood was so completely crushed as among the loyalists here.”<sup>43</sup>

The presence of Union troops in the parish had brought a brief respite to the violence, but Cone was unconvinced that he and his men had affected lasting peace. Blacks and Unionist whites “live in hourly dread of our removal, when the vengeance of their oppressors, rendered more keen by our visit, will vent its wrath upon them, only more cruelly and mercilessly.” Once the army was withdrawn, Cone was certain, the old patterns would begin to repeat themselves again with devastating consequences. “There are many graves here which tell...stories of rapine and murder, yet the living witnesses of their horrors, fathers, brothers, and sons, who meet me every day, dare not whisper a word in conviction of the perpetrators” of the crimes. One resident of Opelousas offered his terror as an excuse for not coming forward: “I can tell you many things, but if I am known as your informant, I must quit my home and property and seek protection in your camp for myself and family. I could live here no longer.” The danger was so evident, Cone concluded, that black men universally refused his requests for meetings as they were “afraid to incur the suspicions which would so readily attach to their visits to me.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Frank M. Cone to George Baldey, May 16, 1869, in United States Army Twenty-Fifth Colored Infantry Regiment Letterbook, 1869, Mss. 4912, Special Collections, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

The language employed by Cone's anonymous source reveals some of the limitations historians face when trying to classify different "types" of racial violence. It is worth reiterating that nearly every interpretation of events in Opelousas in 1868 and 1869 stresses the political nature of the violence. On the ground in Opelousas, however, the perpetrators and the victims of such violence read the situation in an entirely different manner. Returning to Cone's witness, it was apparent that the political violence of September 1868 had implications that carried far beyond contested electoral spaces. Black and white Republicans proved themselves willing to meet armed Democrats in open confrontation throughout Reconstruction, despite the often calamitous results and lopsided casualty reports. Politics in nineteenth century America, after all, was often seen as an inherently violent process through which a man could stake his claims to manhood and the incumbent masculine rights that were associated with it.<sup>45</sup> Hardly shirking from the political fray, Cone's witness instead based his wariness to come forward on his inability to protect his home and family if local "rebels" identified him as the informant.

In addition to the direct threat to loyal black and white households posed by the aftershocks of political violence, Cone also stressed the lingering sense of helplessness

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<sup>45</sup> McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, 239-240; Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 17-19; Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Emberton, *Beyond Redemption*. On how economic and political shifts beginning in the 1820s led to a particularly violent epoch in America's political life between 1820 and 1890, see Ross Barrett, *Rendering Violence: Riots, Strikes, and Upheavals in Nineteenth-Century American Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 4-7. On nineteenth-century political violence and rioting, see Richard Bense, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Michael Feldberg, *The Turbulent Era: Riot & Disorder in Jacksonian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); David Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Mary Ryan, *Civic War: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

and vulnerability that stemmed from the powerlessness of victims to prosecute violent perpetrators for the crimes they had committed. Black men had literally had their families and homes torn asunder by white terrorists—and every day they lived with the knowledge that any action to right such wrongs would only be met with swift retribution once the Union Army left the parish.<sup>46</sup> For black families and communities carving out an autonomous future in postbellum America, this was their reality. It is also a stark reminder of the intensity and durability of racial violence in the post-Civil War South. As black families developed household spaces and redefined what the “home” meant to them, and as black men looked to the home place to define their sense of masculinity, white terrorists recognized a target that folded both symbolic and tangible representations of black autonomy into one physical space. Such violence was not always as ubiquitous in every Southern locale as the Union force found in Opelousas, but black homes everywhere were constantly at risk of being attacked. Under these conditions, black men found it nearly impossible to lay claim to traditional notions of masculinity. In St. Landry Parish, at least, black manhood, in Cone’s unforgettable phrasing, had been “completely crushed.”

Ultimately, of course, violence against the black household intended to destroy notions of black femininity as much as it did African American manhood. Black women had been susceptible to sexual violence for centuries under the legal and cultural

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<sup>46</sup> Cone’s letters to Baldey relate that African Americans and white Unionists in St. Landry Parish felt the need for an armed guard and the presence of the Union Army, and many other Bureau agents and African Americans reported similar convictions from locations across Louisiana and Kentucky. See “Petition of Kentucky Former Black Soldiers to the U.S. Congress,” in *Freedom, Series II*, 822-823; Louise De Martie to Thomas W. Conway, July 23, 1865, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 8; and “Freedmen’s Bureau Chief Superintendent for the District of Kentucky to the Headquarters of the Kentucky and Tennessee Freedmen’s Bureau Assistant Commissioner,” in *Freedom, Series II*, 761-762.



assumptions of slavery, and white attitudes were extremely resistant to change in the postbellum period.<sup>47</sup> In essence, sexual control was essential to racial control in the minds of white men. While sexual assaults occurred in many settings across the postwar South, attacks on and within black homes carried added meaning for both victim and perpetrator. Perhaps most obviously, sexual violence within black homes recalled the vulnerability of black women to the lusts of their white masters, particularly in the sense that white men continued to claim that they had the ability to physically enter black households whenever they desired. Just as slaveholders had violated black women in slave quarters for centuries, white terrorists in the postbellum South mocked the belief in black independence by physically placing themselves in the confines of autonomous black homes. In this sense, the act of sexually assaulting or raping a black woman became a way for white men to fulfill a demented fantasy: in essence, their world would again resemble the one which they had lost only few short months and years before.<sup>48</sup> They might, if for only a little while, reassert their own masculinity and patriarchal rights,

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<sup>47</sup> The secondary literature on the slaveholders and sexual violence is immense. For studies that have influenced my thinking, see White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*; Nell Painter, "Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting," in Linda Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar, eds., *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 125-146; Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Walter P. Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*. The most harrowing accounts of the sexual assault of the enslaved often comes from slave narratives published in the nineteenth century. See Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave* (New York: np, 1849); Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (New York: G.W. Carleton & Co., 1868); and Harriett Ann Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston: np, 1861).

<sup>48</sup> Joel Williamson has, in part, explained the creation of the "black beast rapist" myth in the late nineteenth-century as the result of repressed sexual desires among white men and fantasies about rampant black male sexuality. See Williamson, *Crucible of Race*, 291-295, 306-310. Diane Sommerville has recently argued that changing legal definitions of interracial sex in the late-nineteenth century to construe any sexual contact between black men and white women as rape was paramount in the "expanded number of black rapists at century's end, as imagined by many white southerners." See Sommerville, *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 200-217.

all the while denying that black men had the ability to protect their families—and that black women had any claims to femininity that had to be respected by white men.<sup>49</sup>

For black women in the postbellum South, the potential for sexual violence was nearly everywhere. As with other forms of everyday violence, threats of sexual violence and rape were more prevalent than physical assaults, but in the context of a home invasion such threats could be terrifying and devastating. Consider the affidavit sworn out by Mary Bryant in July 1867. According to Bryant, a freedwoman living in the river town of Maysville, Kentucky, located about seventy-five miles northeast of Lexington, a white man named Lewis Smith appeared at her home on the evening of July 1 and “jumped into the door saying at the same time you damned old yellow bitch I will kill you and have all the hide taken off your damned old yellow back.” Not content with these threats, Smith continued his invective and suggested that he and other white men in the area would return and gang rape Bryant: “I’ll get a parcel of fellows and come up here tonight, and take evry damned one out of the room and fuck you.”<sup>50</sup> Startling in its vulgarity, Smith’s warning nonetheless conveyed a clear message. Alongside his disregard for the black home and the ability of black men to defend it, Smith also asserted his own right—and the right of other white men—to engage in sexual intercourse with black women whenever he desired. Furthermore, Smith’s insistence that he would rape Bryant suggests the perpetuation of an ideology of exuberant black female sexuality that white men had developed during the antebellum period to justify their sexual relations with female slaves.<sup>51</sup> While Bryant was obviously in very serious danger, she was not

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<sup>49</sup> Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 190-191.

<sup>50</sup> Affidavit of Mary Bryant, July 5, 1867, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 27.

<sup>51</sup> White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 27-41; Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*; Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North

helpless. After Bryant had sworn out an affidavit to the Freedmen's Bureau, C.J. True, local commissioner in Maysville, wrote to John Ely to report that the Bureau court would handle the matter since the civil authorities would do nothing.<sup>52</sup>

Across postbellum Kentucky, home invasions such as the one experienced by Mary Bryant were more common than many historians recognize. In May 1866, David Beeler testified that four white men broke into a home where he and several other freedpeople were residing in Nelson County. One evening early in the month, Beeler claimed, John Rhodes, Thomas Vickers, John Stewart, and one man he did not know knocked on the door of his residence and proceeded to rob the freedmen at gunpoint. By the time they were finished, Rhodes and the other men had taken all of the money they found in the house, pistol-whipped Beeler five times, stolen a coat that belonged to a freedwoman's dead husband, and promised that "if I told anyone that they had been there [they] would kill every one of them." Before the men left, however, the "one of the party whose name he does not know then asked Lizzie Talbot daughter of Mrs Talbot to go out with him." Terrified, Lizzie responded that she did not believe it was right for the man to speak to her that way. He was undeterred: "He then told her to come upstairs with him, she told him she could not do so. He then made her go upstairs." Beeler's affidavit did not continue any further, but the indictment presented against the white men at the Freedmen's Court in Louisville contained only the charge of attempted rape. Without the

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Carolina Press, 1992). White succinctly discusses the stereotypes of the "Jezebel" and the "Mammy" that white men developed to classify black women as either overly-sexual—and thus incapable of consciously rejecting the slaveholders sexual advances—or non-sexual during the antebellum period.

<sup>52</sup> C.J. True to John Ely, July 10, 1867, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 27.

identity of the perpetrator, however, the Commonwealth was unable to indict the man who had forced Lizzie Talbot upstairs—with every intention of raping her.<sup>53</sup>

Sexual assaults were also common in Louisiana. Freedmen's Bureau agents reported that independent black homes were outraged and broken open on a regular basis, and that African American women were often raped. Although the number of sexual assaults reported by agents represented only a tiny percentage of the total number of outrages that are documented in Bureau records, those that were discovered suggest that sexual attacks were as prevalent in Reconstruction-era Louisiana as they were in other Southern states. In May 1868, Bureau agent John White noted from St. Martin Parish that a white man named McRae had been arrested for the attempted rape of Pamala Castille, a freedwoman living in the area. Through the "negligence" of local authorities, however, the man had escaped from civil custody with the assistance of members of the Ku Klux Klan. In August of the same year, E.N. Bean sent a similar report to his superior officers in New Orleans that related the trouble he was having bringing in Judson Houston, a white man who had allegedly raped Martha Lagoe, a freedwoman from Bienville Parish. The failure of the civil authorities to prosecute McRae and Houston was not shocking given the general indifference of Southern whites to the tribulations of African Americans in the era, but it is a stark reminder of the futility felt by black victims who sought justice for themselves and their families from the pressure of everyday violence.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Affidavit of David Beeler, May 31, 1866, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 119.

<sup>54</sup> Louisiana Assistant Commissioner, "Murders & Outrages Reported from May 10/68 to Dec 15/68," in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 34.

Attacks on black women that were not explicitly sexual assaults or rape were often laden with sexual undertones. In the very early stages of Reconstruction in New Orleans, Arana Johnson, the wife of a former slave then serving in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Louisiana Regiment Native Guards, was kidnapped from her home at No. 90 Circus Street and taken “Eleven miles down the Mexican Gulf Rail Road” to the plantation of her husband’s former master. According to the anonymous letter sent by a unionist to General Nathaniel Banks, four white men claiming to act under the authority of the Provost Marshal of St. Bernard Parish had abducted Johnson and carried her out of the city where an overseer named “Stampley...subjected her to the most cruel and unmerciful treatment.” After beating Johnson with a large stick, Stampley forced her to remove her clothes “and Struck fifty two lashes” across her naked body.<sup>55</sup>

The abduction and brutal assault suffered by Arana Johnson illustrates several important traits of home place violence that have yet to be mentioned. First, everyday racial violence directed against African American homes was often “performative” in nature.<sup>56</sup> More than violence that occurred in other spaces in the postbellum South, home invasions and attacks on the black family structure directly invoked cultural assumptions regarding gender and the complex intersections between race and notions of manhood and femininity. In the assaults perpetrated against independent and autonomous black homes, white terrorists often forced black men and women to take an active role in the destruction of black bodies and property.

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<sup>55</sup> “Anonymous Louisiana Unionist to the Commander of the Department of the Gulf,” in *Freedom, Series I, Volume III, The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South*; eds. Ira Berlin, Thavolia Glymph, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland, and Julie Saville (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1990), 432-434.

<sup>56</sup> Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 180-183, 205-220, 335-336n5, 6; Elaine Frantz Parsons, “Midnight Rangers: Costume and Performance in the Reconstruction-Era Ku Klux Klan,” in *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 92, No. 3 (Dec., 2005), pp. 811-836.

A particularly brutal form of performative violence involved sexual assaults in which white men forced black males to witness the rape of black women. In 1866, for instance, Freedmen's Bureau agent R.E. Johnston reported that on the night of January 17, in Nicholas County, Kentucky, three white men "went to the house of a Freedmen living on the Farm of Reason Talbott drew a pistol and stood guard over him while each in turn ravished his wife."<sup>57</sup> The physical damage of the assault must have been nearly unimaginable, and the psychological devastation wrought by the inability of the husband to protect the sanctity of his wife's body only compounded their misery. It was not enough for whites to simply destroy black homes and bodies; by forcing black men to behave like children instead of men, and by compelling black women to submit to white men as slaveholders had done, violent whites assaulted the very idea of sovereign black households and denied to black men and women the rights and privileges associated with manhood and femininity.<sup>58</sup>

The most fully-developed performative assaults against black households involved both sexual assaults against African American women and the forced destruction, by black men, of the independent home space. In June 1866, James Fidler, a Bureau Superintendent in central Kentucky, wrote to John Ely, Chief Superintendent of the Freedmen's Bureau in the state, to relate a series of attacks on black homes in Marion County. Just a mile east out the small town of Lebanon, Fidler reported that "seven

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<sup>57</sup> R.E. Johnston to John Ely, November 5, 1866, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 17.

<sup>58</sup> Parsons, "Midnight Rangers." Parsons' recent study of the Klan also emphasizes that the terrorists demanded that freedpeople believe the preposterous tales that they told—that the Klansmen were ghosts, or that they were from hell, were some of the more popular superstitions. By forcing the freedmen and freedwomen to act as if they believed such nonsense, white Southerners reinforced the notion that blacks were particularly ignorant, gullible, and unfit for citizenship. "By using violence to coerce victims to perform inadequacy and fit themselves into demeaning national popular tropes, Ku-Klux hoped to convince their victims, themselves, and those who learned about the attacks of the justice of white dominance." See Parsons, *Ku-Klux*, 101-108.

families of colored persons have built houses, and are now residing in them....An examination elicits the fact that five of the men have rented, and are properly attending to, nearly two hundred and fifty acres of land.” Cast in a darker light, the level of autonomy achieved by these African American men and their families was too much for local white men to accept. From over a dozen witnesses that he managed to interview, Fidler surmised that a group of twenty local whites gathered during the evening of June 7 and attacked the seven homes simultaneously. The assault was brutal and precise:

On last night the night of the seventh (7) of June, a party of young white men...repaired to the residences of these colored men, which are close together, and broke open doors, robbed the men of their arms, compelled them to tear the roofs off of their own houses, struck one man in the head with a pistol (James Dennis), struck another (George Hood) over the head with a musket,—another (Mary Jane Marple’s) on the head with a pistol, another (W<sup>m</sup> W. Hood) on his arm disabling him, whipped Len Ansbro aged 45 unmercifully with a birchen switch; insulted the women, shot off pistols at their dogs, threatened with drawn pistols to kill all whom they saw, and, in addition to this, one of the gallant company attempted to commit [*rape*] on the person of Caroline Dennis as she testifies.

Despite the fact that he had over twenty black witnesses who could positively identify a member of the party, Fidler felt powerless: “I am satisfied that any effort to bring the only man recognized by the colored persons to justice before a Kenty. tribunal with no white evidence against him would be a perfect farce.” There was nothing more to do, Fidler concluded, except search for a cooperative white witness so that he might then file charges in civil court.<sup>59</sup>

For James Dennis, a 45 year-old freedman who headed a household of ten and was one of the victims of the Lebanon attacks, the assault on his home was disastrous.

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<sup>59</sup> “Freedmen’s Bureau Superintendent for Marion, Washington, Taylor, and Casey Counties, Kentucky, to the Freedmen’s Bureau Chief Superintendent for Kentucky, Enclosing the Affidavits of a Kentucky Freedman and His Wife,” in *Freedom, Series III, Volume II*, 914-917.

According to Dennis' affidavit, "three or four persons, white...visited his residence...and, after breaking down the door, stated that they intended to tear down his house." He, along with his wife, attempted to expostulate with the men, at which point the white men drew their pistols and threatened his life. At gunpoint, Dennis "was compelled to go on top of his own residence and tear off the roof." While locating a ladder that he could use to access the roof and destroy his home—quite literally ripping his own sense of independence to shreds—one of the party pistol-whipped Dennis and threatened that "he & his family must leave their residence and *go back* & live with their *former* masters. That they had determined no negroes should build houses for themselves away from their former masters." The implications for Dennis were quite clear. In his own words, Dennis "was compelled by threats, and through fears of his life, to tear the whole of the roof off of one side of his house, and a part off of the other side." The white men finally left with one last threat: if Dennis and his family did not vacate their homes, the men would return and hang him.<sup>60</sup>

James Dennis' wife, Caroline, substantiated the testimony of her husband, but her experience of the home invasion was slightly different. Although they had been together when the white men first entered their home, the terrorists only forced James to climb to the roof and tear it off. Isolated inside the home, Caroline testified that "while her husband was on top of the house one of the white men was with her in the house; that while with her he attempted to *violate* her person & only desisted when the other white men came into the house." That the white invader halted the potential sexual assault because of the presence of other white men was unusual, as most white terrorists

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*



supported each other's actions no matter what they were as long as they fit within a larger framework that asserted white authority over the "private spaces and identities" of African Americans.<sup>61</sup> These concerted actions by the white men who attacked the Dennis household, therefore, were highly symbolic. Unable to defend his home and family, James Dennis suffered the ultimate humiliation of destroying his own house—a tangible representation of his manhood and independence—while his wife was subjected to the sexual advances of the white intruder.

The white men surely resented the success of Dennis and the other freedmen living in the area, but more egregious than black advancement was the simple fact that these African Americans had established a degree of independence in their personal lives and they refused to live in physical proximity to their former masters in the material structures they had occupied while enslaved.<sup>62</sup> James must be forced to do everything the white men said, and, for at least one of the party, Caroline would have to submit to his sexual desires, just as enslaved women had been raped by slaveholders for centuries. For the terrorists who perpetrated such assaults, sexual violence denied to black women the privileges and respect that these same men claimed for white women. Ultimately, of

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* On cooperation between white assailants in regards to sexual violence, see Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 214-219. "Most assailants cooperated with one another's various innovation on the night rider script. Overall innovations fit within a larger framework of assertions of the power and authority of white men over the private spaces and identities of African Americans, indeed the power to interrupt or destroy those spaces and identities."

<sup>62</sup> Much of the scholarship on black mobility during and after the Civil War examines African American migration from the South. See Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1976); Janette Thomas Greenwood, *First Fruits of Freedom: The Migration of Former Slaves and Their Search for Equity in Worcester, Massachusetts, 1862-1900* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009); William Cohen, *At Freedom's Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861-1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy my Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). As the Dennis' affidavits suggest, however, former slaveholders rejected any type of black mobility after emancipation that altered the physical geography that slavery had created in their minds. See Camp, *Closer to Freedom*.

course, racial violence could not restore the legality of slavery in postbellum America—but it certainly could be utilized to limit the practical realization of autonomy and sovereignty in the personal lives of African American families.

In addition to the threat sexual violence from white terrorists, black women were also more likely to experience household assaults in urban areas than black men. The extent of urban home place violence, in general, has been underrepresented in the historical record. Those studies that do mention home place violence in Southern cities are often concerned with extraordinarily violent events such as race riots, during which entire communities were subject to marauding whites.<sup>63</sup> The main narrative of home place attacks, however, situates such violence in rural, isolated areas where white perpetrators might remain anonymous as they terrorized their victims. Such a focus has been driven by the notoriety, contemporary and historical, of the Ku Klux Klan and other groups of nightriders that repeatedly violated the sanctity of black homes throughout the rural South in the aftermath of the Civil War.<sup>64</sup> One of the most famous images of the era, “Visit of the Ku-Klux,” seemingly solidifies the nature of household terror during Reconstruction. Carried in the February 24, 1872, issue of *Harper’s Weekly*, “Visit of the Ku-Klux” depicted the assault of an African American family by three Klansmen. As a freedman warms himself by the fireplace, his wife and oldest child prepare a meal for the

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<sup>63</sup> An outstanding example of this is Stephen Ash’s coverage of the 1866 massacre in Memphis, Tennessee. See Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis*. On the 1898 riot in Wilmington, North Carolina, see Timothy B. Tyson and David S. Cecelski, eds., *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and its Legacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). For an examination of how race riots and mob violence led to the overthrow of a biracial political coalition and disrupted an entire community, see Jane Dailey, “Deference and Violence in the Postbellum Urban South: Manners and Massacres in Danville, Virginia,” *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (Aug., 1997), pp. 553-590.

<sup>64</sup> Kidada E. Williams, “Resolving the Paradox of our Lynching Fixation: Reconsidering Racialized Violence in the American South after Slavery,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 6 (Sept., 2005), pp. 323-350.

family. The other two children eagerly await their dinner, a middle-child already seated at the table as a young girl in the foreground stares innocently at her mother by the fire. Unbeknownst to the family, three white terrorists peer into the tidy, rustic cabin. In the doorway, one of the Klansmen prepares to fire his rifle into this scene of quiet, familial bliss.<sup>65</sup>

From an examination of everyday violence, however, it is evident that far higher numbers of African American homes were targeted by people whom the victims personally knew, and many of these persons lived in urban areas. In cities, white terrorists often targeted black women whose husbands were away from the home place: during the early months of Reconstruction, therefore, the wives of Union soldiers often came under attack. The personal ordeals of Arana Johnson and Mary Wilson have already been discussed in this chapter, but their stories are worth repeating because of the way they contradict the traditional narrative of home place violence. Both Johnson and Wilson were abducted from their homes by persons connected to their former master, and were carried outside of New Orleans and Lexington, respectively, where they were beaten and tortured. The women also relayed the incidents to civil and military officials in the hope of receiving some form of redress for their suffering, but justice was either painfully slow or non-existent. These two examples of such perverse violence, and the others cited herein, should be enough to retire the myth that Southern whites felt compelled to terrorize black households anonymously after sunset. Attacks were carried out in the open, on city streets, and with relatively little fear that black victims might ever receive justice. Abductions, kidnapping, assaults, and whippings do not convey the same

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<sup>65</sup> *Harper's Weekly*, February 24, 1872. On the importance of artwork and visual representations of violence, see Barrett, *Rendering Violence*.

cultural power as the image of a Klansman firing indiscriminately into a quiet African American home, but such everyday forms of violence were just as relevant to black Southerners in postbellum America.

One of the defining characteristics of urban household violence were the efforts of former slaveholders to kidnap African American children in the early years of Reconstruction. It is difficult to conceive of a more devastating assault on the autonomous black family than the abduction of children who were then forced back into a form of slavery through apprenticeship, and many parents conveyed a sense of complete loss and hopelessness in their efforts to retrieve their sons and daughters. This violent affront to both black men and women was a clear message from white terrorists that black sovereignty within the home would not be respected. On August 10, 1865, Frank Bradford wrote to Thomas W. Conway, Assistant Commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau in Louisiana, and informed the official that his children had "Disappeared" from his house at "No. 55 Clio St[.]" Bradford's children, Samuel and Caroline, aged nine and six, respectively, had been attending the Liberty School on Common Street before their disappearance—and Bradford believed that his land lady and her husband were responsible for the kidnapping. According to Bradford, the pair had told his children that Bradford would place them in prison and that they should run away from their father. When his children went missing, Bradford questioned the two individuals, but they simply claimed that Samuel and Caroline had run off. Unconvinced, Bradford pleaded with Conway to look into the disappearance of his children as he was certain that his landlords had spirited them out of the city.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Frank Bradford to Thomas W. Conway, August 10, 1865, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1027, reel no. 7.

Removing African American children from the immediate vicinity of their parents was another popular ploy of whites who hoped to fool black mothers, black fathers, and civil and military officials as part of a broader effort to kidnap the children. In January 1867, Ellen Ross initiated a quest to retrieve her thirteen year-old son, Thomas, who had been taken to Mississippi from Louisville, Kentucky, against her will. Chronicled in the records of the Freedmen's Bureau, the ordeal would last several months and involve individuals from three states before reaching its unsatisfactory conclusion. On the twenty-first of January, Ross swore out an affidavit and claimed that her son had been hired by a Mr. Sharp who lived on the corner of Fourth Street and Jefferson "to go to Henderson Ky with M<sup>r</sup> David Burbanks [*sic*]." According to Ross' statement, Burbank was to return Thomas to his mother on Christmas Day 1866 "free of expence & half of his wages also." From what Ross could discover, however, Burbank "sent the boy away from his plantation in July last and now she can get no intelligence of the boy at all, having written three letters." By February 1867, Ross' affidavit had reached the desk of R.W. Roberts at Bureau headquarters in Louisville. From a letter composed and sent to Thomas F. Cheany, Bureau Superintendent at Henderson, Kentucky, it is clear that Sharp and Burbank had entered into a legal contract with Ross "sometime in February or March 1866...[by which they] bound themselves to pay one half the wages to the boys parents and at christmas of that year to return the boy to this city free of charge."<sup>67</sup>

Beyond this point of agreement—that Burbank had taken Thomas from Louisville in early 1866—there was simply confusion and misdirection. For one reason or another, Thomas found himself in the city "Work-house" at that time and, eager to secure his

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<sup>67</sup> "Affidavit of a Kentucky Freedwoman," in *Freedom, Series III, Volume II*, 862-863.

release, Ellen Ross contracted with Sharp and Burbank for employment for her son in western Kentucky. What must have seemed like a wonderful opportunity for the Ross's, however, was apparently fraudulent. According to Roberts' February letter, "It cannot yet be ascertained whether the Messrs Burbank or the keeper either had any order to release the boy from the work house, or whether the transaction had any legal sanction." As part of his own investigation, Roberts discovered that Burbank had written to W.N. Hogan, a resident of Louisville, in April 1866 and reported that Thomas was at their farm and doing well. After that, he could learn only that Thomas had been sent from the plantation in July 1866 and that Burbank could give no satisfactory knowledge as to the whereabouts of the child. Finally, on March 25, 1867, Burbank wrote to C.H. Fredrick, Bureau Superintendent of the Louisville Sub-District, and claimed that someone had lied to the Bureau—he had not forced Thomas off of his plantation, the boy had left of his own accord and lived with another freedman nearby. The last Burbank had heard, Thomas was living in Memphis, Tennessee, and doing better than he had been in Louisville where he had supposedly found the child in rags.<sup>68</sup>

Burbank's March 1867 letter further contradicted nearly everything in Ross' affidavit. According to Burbank, he had applied to the Police Court in early 1866 to obtain laborers from the Work-house and that the civilian officials accommodated his request. He also claimed that he had wanted to bring the freedmen before the Bureau to make labor contracts, but that such action had been impossible at the time. Furthermore, Burbank purported that Thomas Ross had been eager to leave Louisville and that the young man swore that he did not have any living parents. Shockingly, Burbank claimed

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<sup>68</sup> "Affidavit of a Kentucky Freedwoman," in *Freedom, Series III, Volume II*, 862-863.

that he had never met Ellen Ross because he did not know she was alive. By the time that they reached Burbank's plantation in Mississippi, however, Thomas Ross' attitude had changed. He was insolent and unwilling to labor, Burbank charged, and when Thomas ran away he did not seek the young man's return because he was not a productive worker. The holes in Burbank's story were fairly obvious to Bureau officials. As R.W. Roberts bluntly wrote:

It would seem that there is some truth in the intimation of Ellen the mother, that there was an understanding between the Messrs Burbank and those having authority, that this boy was upon his release, to be removed from the state, and taken hundreds of miles from his parents and wholly without their consent or knowledge, and when asked by the mother and this Bureau for information they simply answer that the boy ran away from their plantation—and no further satisfaction can be obtained.<sup>69</sup>

Here the documentary trail ends, with a child spirited hundreds of miles away from his parents and the city of Louisville—made to labor on a plantation in Mississippi until he was no longer useful to Burbank and his associates. For Ellen Ross, however, there was still more uncertainty and pain, as violence had, in all likelihood, destroyed forever the household she hoped to establish in Louisville.

For other freedpeople, the establishment of an urban household signified a successful migration from the rural countryside and an entirely new physical space in which they might work out the meaning of freedom. Urban migrations, however, did not always allow individual freedmen to escape violence.<sup>70</sup> This was especially the case for black women, many of whom rented rooms or apartments from their employers because

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> See Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). For instance, Thomas Green, a black Union soldier from Louisiana, planned to move to Louisville, Kentucky, after the war and was beaten and knocked unconscious aboard the steamboat he and his family reached their destination. See Affidavit of Thomas Green, August 3, 1866, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 120.

they could not afford to purchase their own home. On July 5, 1867, Emma Grimm complained to the Freedmen's Bureau in Louisville that the son of her landlady, William Prather, had entered her quarters the previous evening and "asked her to let him have improper connection with her and he would give her two dollars." After she refused, a clearly intoxicated Prather demanded that Grimm find his clothes as he did not know where they were. Frightened, Grimm reported the attempted assault to Prather's mother and spent the rest of the evening with a friend. On the morning of the fifth, Prather confronted Grimm in Mrs. Prather's kitchen and beat her with a fireplace poker until she ran out of the house and into the yard. According to Grimm, Prather swore "Damn you you went and told my mother a Damned lie on me and if you dont go out of the yard I will shoot you."<sup>71</sup> Prather's actions revealed a mindset that was pervasively common among violent white men in the postbellum South: black women, in the white imagination, had no rights to the privacy of their home spaces or their bodies, and they must submit to the whims of white men in any circumstance or risk further humiliation and bodily harm. Although Grimm refused to internalize the implications of Prather's actions, it was clear that racial violence had again violated the sanctity of the home and severely limited the realization of black independence.

Such incidents of urban household violence were extremely commonplace after the Civil War, and the Freedmen's Bureau documented thousands of similar events during its brief existence.<sup>72</sup> Although the nature of these attacks varied a great deal from

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<sup>71</sup> Affidavit of Emma Grimm, July 5, 1867, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 120.

<sup>72</sup> The Bureau closed in 1872, but it was in disarray long before its official demise. Local offices closed in Kentucky during July 1868, and in Louisiana operations were terminated statewide on January 1, 1869, with the exception of educational efforts. On the operation and effectiveness of the Bureau, see White, *The Freedmen's Bureau in Louisiana*; Ross A. Webb, "'The Past is Never Dead, It's Not Even Past:' Benjamin P. Runkle and the Freedmen's Bureau in Kentucky, 1866-1870," in *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, Vol. 84, No. 4 (1986), pp. 343-360; John C. Rodrique, "Labor Militancy and Black Grassroots



one individual incident to another, at their core these assaults were aimed at squeezing black families to such an extent that African American men and women would voluntarily forego autonomous and independent households in order to secure their physical safety. For the freedpeople, however, the home had come to hold a special significance that white terrorism could not easily erase. As Benjamin Scott testified in the summer of 1867, his family would only be complete when he regained control of his children and his family and his household occupied the same physical space. According to Scott, who testified at Bureau offices in New Orleans, Alfred Roman had illegally detained his daughter, Virginia, and refused to release the child to her father. Psychologically devastating by itself, the kidnapping also prevented Scott from placing Virginia on the path to an autonomous future. In a letter sent to Roman, local Bureau officials described the kidnapping of Virginia Scott in terms that spoke volumes about how common such occurrences were. “Benjamin Scott represents at this office that you have in your possession a daughter belonging to him (Virginia Scott 10 yrs of age) whom he desires to take away and put in school. You will please deliver to him the child on receipt of this, or if you do not wish to comply with this request, call at this office and have the matter investigated.”<sup>73</sup> For Scott, as for so many other freedmen, real

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Political Mobilization in the Louisiana Sugar Region, 1865-1868,” in *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (2001), pp. 115-145; Mary Farmer-Kaiser, *Freedwomen and the Freedmen’s Bureau: Race, Gender, and Public Policy in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); Paul A. Cimbal and Randall M. Miller, eds., *The Freedmen’s Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999); Paul A. Cimbal, *Under the Guardianship of the Nation: The Freedmen’s Bureau and the Reconstruction of Georgia, 1865-1870* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997).

<sup>73</sup> Louis Jolissaint to Alfred Roman, June 14, 1867, in Records of the New Orleans Field Offices, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869, Record Group 105, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, National Archives Microfilm Publication M1483 (hereafter cited as Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1483), reel no. 1.

independence would only be achieved when he could finally unite his family under one roof and, together, independently decide on their own future.

Few Southerners understood the connection between black independence and autonomy, American citizenship, and home place violence better than the black men and women who were victimized by such attacks. In March 1871, African American citizens from the vicinity of Frankfort, Kentucky, gathered to draft and submit a petition to Congress on the grounds that “life, liberty, and property are unprotected among the colored race of this state.” According to the meeting:

Organized bands of desperate and lawless men, mainly composed of soldiers of the late rebel armies...have, by force, terror, and violence, subverted all civil society among colored people; thus utterly rendering insecure the safety of persons and property, overthrowing all those rights which are the basis and objects of the Government, which are expressly guaranteed to us by the Constitution of the United States as amended. We believe you are not familiar with the Ku Klux Klans riding nightly over the country, going from county to county, and in the county towns, spreading terror wherever they go by robbing, whipping, ravishing, and killing our people without provocation, compelling colored people to break the ice and bathe in the chilly waters of the Kentucky River.

The terror that the committee described encompassed nearly every aspect of everyday life. To refute claims made by white Kentuckians that such violence did not occur, the petition listed 116 specific assaults levied against African Americans from 1868 to 1871 across the Commonwealth. Alongside murders, lynchings, beatings, whippings, and the destruction of black schools and churches, the committee emphasized the repeated home invasions that black Kentuckians were subject to. “Our people are driven from their homes, having no redress,” the petition claimed, and we “appeal to you as law abiding citizens to enact some laws that will protect us, and that will enable us to exercise the

rights of citizens.” In other words, restricting the Klan and other white terrorists was simply the first step in a larger effort that would be necessary to eradicate racial violence from American life and secure some semblance of personal security for the freedmen in their own homes.<sup>74</sup>

At first glance, the March 1871 petition appears to support the assumption that the Klan was responsible for the vast majority of the racial violence African Americans were forced to endure. A closer reading of the 116 specific outrages, however, reveals that the committee purposefully characterized a great deal of non-Klan violence as the “Ku-Klux disorder,” most likely for the simple reason that such a presentation would appeal to its intended audience—Northern Congressmen. In their enumeration of the waves of terror haunting the Bluegrass State, only 34 of 116 crimes, or roughly 29 percent, were attributed to the Klan. Much more common were ambiguous descriptions such as “mob” and “incendiaries,” classifications that allowed the committee to capture a more accurate overview of the everyday racial violence that troubled the Commonwealth than a limited focus on the Klan would permit.<sup>75</sup> From this perspective, the petition should be seen as a continuation of the individual reports that poured into local Freedmen’s Bureau offices in Kentucky before their abrupt closure in July 1868, and not as a description of a new phenomenon that originated with the rise of the Klan.

As with earlier reports of home place violence, the outrages detailed by the committee ranged from verbal threats to murder and included a number of assaults on

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<sup>74</sup> U.S. Senate, *Memorial of a Committee Appointed at a Meeting of Colored Citizens of Frankfort, Kentucky, and Vicinity, Praying Enactment of Laws for Better Protection of Life*, S.Mis.Doc.49 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1871), *Serial Set* 1467.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* I have attributed to the Klan any grievance that directly mentioned the group by name. The petitioners do not appear to have rotated usage of identifiers to avoid repetition, as four or five successive outrages were charged to the Klan in multiple instances.

women and children, actions specifically undertaken to weaken and destroy autonomous black families. In August 1868, seven freedmen were “ordered to leave their homes” by white ruffians near Stanford, Lincoln County, while an unspecified number of African Americans were “attacked, robbed, and driven from Summerville, in Greene County.” The tactics employed by marauding whites had changed little by April 1871, as a group of men burned a fence that Winstone Hawkins had built and hung a notice over his door to “Not come home anymore.” Beyond verbal threats, the reported physical violence was devastating. A freedman named Spears had been abducted from his home in Harrodsburg during January 1869, and a group of whites attacked Frank Boume’s house in Jessamine County during March of the same year, killing a man named Roberts. In July 1869, a mob broke into a home in Casey County and killed four freedpeople—three men and one woman. Elsewhere, brigands forced John Dickerson from his home place in Henry County on December 12, 1870, and “ravished” his daughter, while “incendiaries” indiscriminately torched black property in Fayette County during January 1871. The terror, described by the petition simply as “the condition of affairs now existing in the State of Kentucky,” was complete.<sup>76</sup>

And yet, despite the pervasiveness of white terrorism, the mere existence of the petition speaks to the determination among black Southerners to solidify their households as spaces of black independence where masculine and feminine identities could be clearly established. Of the six committee members—Henry Marrs, Henry Lynn, H.H. Trumbo, Samuel Demsey, B. Smith, and B.J. Crampton—designated to attach their names to the petition, four listed occupations. Trumbo and Crampton identified themselves as a grocer

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

and barber, respectively, while Marrs taught at a “Colored School” and Lynn worked as a livery stable keeper. Although all claimed respectable occupations, these men were hardly wealthy elites with easy access to economic or political power. As representatives of one of the most vulnerable groups in the Commonwealth, moreover, these men knew from first-hand experience that white Kentuckians had long turned to violence in order to destroy black autonomy. Unsurprisingly, the committee associated attacks on black homes with the larger effort to silence African Americans who dared express the rights “expressly guaranteed to us by the Constitution of the United States.”<sup>77</sup> In addition to being driven from their homes, black Kentuckians were also “driven from the polls, refused the right to vote [and]...many have been slaughtered while attempting to vote.”<sup>78</sup>

It was a state of affairs that had existed for far too long. Over five years before Marrs, Lynn, Trumbo, Demsey, Smith, and Crampton courageously affixed their names to a petition that would be printed by order of the assembled Senate during the 42<sup>nd</sup> United States Congress, John Moltimore Howser travelled to Louisville and testified at the Freedmen’s Court concerning the destruction of his house and his eviction from his home place in Spencer County. It had been nearly four and a half years since Green Jones and the freedmen in the surrounding area had been taken from their homes and viciously whipped because they refused to live on their former master’s property. In some ways, the changes that Howser, Green, and millions of other freedpeople experienced in the half-decade following the Civil War were revolutionary.<sup>79</sup> In others,

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<sup>77</sup> Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me*, 5-9, 43-47. Williams specifically argues that attacks on black households were “intended to signify black families’ lack of protection in the context of domestic captivity.”

<sup>78</sup> U.S. Senate, *Memorial of a Committee Appointed at a Meeting of Colored Citizens of Frankfort, Kentucky*.

<sup>79</sup> On the progressive aspects, and the failures, of Reconstruction in this regard, see Foner, *Reconstruction*; Egerton, *Wars of Reconstruction*.

racial violence still aimed to hem black Southerners into defined roles and physical spaces that limited personal and familial independence.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, white Southerners targeted black households and families in order to punish those individuals whose achievements carried them too far from the status they had occupied as slaves. Black autonomy and independence were frightening concepts for white Southerners, and they would employ appalling levels of violence in the hope of erasing African Americans from public life. For far too many black Southerners, such violence was devastating. While individual acts of terror carried enormous weight, it was the consistency of racial terrorism that black Southerners identified as most oppressive.<sup>80</sup> Even then, attacks on black homes that destroyed physical structures and forced African American families to move or relocate were never able to achieve the ends that white Southerners truly desired. White terrorists marshaled all of the violence that they could—but it would never be enough to force John Howser or Henry Marrs to forego an independent household and move back into the spaces they had occupied while enslaved. Home place terrorism did indelibly shape the postbellum landscape and the establishment of independent black homes, but it could never extinguish the tangible and symbolic importance of the household to black men, women, and children.

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<sup>80</sup> Richard Hofstadter noted in the midst of the violence that wracked America in the late 1960s that Americans “have a remarkable lack of memory where violence is concerned and have left most of our excesses a part of our buried history.” In many ways, the historical focus on extraordinary violence can be seen as an attempt to rectify this—but at the same time it compounds the issue by hiding the mundane forms of violence discussed in this chapter. See Hofstadter, “Reflections on Violence in the United States,” in Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, eds., *American Violence: A Documentary History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970).

## Chapter 4 – “Twice I have been shot at in my schoolroom...”: Violence and Education

Douglass Wilson and Edmonia Highgate were two of the thousands of African Americans living in New Orleans during the violent summer of 1866. Across the city, black residents were harassed and outraged on a daily basis as political tensions between Republicans and Democrats over passage of the “black codes” and questions of back enfranchisement threatened to reach boiling point. By late July, the “violent feelings of hostility” between the factions spilled over in one of the most infamous incidents of Reconstruction violence—the New Orleans massacre. That July 30, outside the Mechanics’ Institute, a mob composed primarily of members of the New Orleans Police Force and ex-Confederate soldiers harassed, assaulted, and murdered blacks and delegates to the Louisiana Constitutional Convention with impunity. The police, sent to restore order, instead joined the mob. When federal troops finally arrived on the scene two hours later, the rout was complete. Dr. Albert Hartsuff, the military surgeon charged with assessing the number of casualties, reported “thirty-seven certainly, and ten more probably, killed on the side of the convention, against a single citizen [hit by a stray bullet] on the side of the city authorities.”<sup>1</sup> On the national level, the massacre, and another eerily similar one in Memphis, Tennessee, would serve as a major turning point between Presidential and Radical Reconstruction. In brief, the violence of the mob

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<sup>1</sup> *New Orleans Tribune*, October 9, 1866. See also, James G. Hollandsworth, *An Absolute Massacre: The New Orleans Race Riot of July 30, 1866* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 138-150; Gilles Vandal, *The New Orleans Riot of 1866: Anatomy of a Tragedy* (Baton Rouge: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1984).

backfired. They had hoped to preserve the white republic through force; instead, the mob had done more than Radicals could have ever dreamed in convincing the North that Congressional intervention would be needed to effectively handle the defeated Southern states. Strangely enough, so it seemed, white terrorism had set the nation on the road to African American citizenship and universal manhood suffrage.<sup>2</sup>

On the ground in New Orleans such progress was more difficult to discern. For Edmonia Highgate and Douglass Wilson, the violent white supremacism evident in the massacre continued to manifest itself through tremendous disruptions to the education of black children. Wilson, a former Union soldier, recalled several years later the everyday struggle of sending his children to school in the aftermath of the riot. “We had no idea that we should see them return home in the evening. Big white boys and half-grown men used to pelt them with stones and run them down with open knives, both to and from school,” Wilson began. “Sometimes they came home bruised, stabbed, beaten half to death, and some times quite dead. My own son himself was often thus beaten.” The meaning of such violence was hardly lost on Wilson. “He has on his forehead to-day a scar over his right eye,” the former Union soldier continued, “which sadly tells the story of his trying experience in those days in his efforts to get an education. I was wounded in the war, trying to get my freedom, and he over the eye, trying to get an education.”<sup>3</sup> For Wilson and so many others, the violence of the Civil War spilled over into Reconstruction and became invariably associated with efforts to secure the fruits of citizenship on a personal level.

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<sup>2</sup> *Harper's Weekly*, March 30, 1867.

<sup>3</sup> Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 279; John David Smith, *We Ask Only for Even-Handed Justice: Black Voices From Reconstruction* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 98.



Edmonia Highgate was another African American resident of New Orleans who escaped the slaughter of the riot but lived through its aftershocks. Born in Syracuse, New York, in 1844, Highgate had moved to Louisiana by the summer of 1866 to serve as a teacher for the American Missionary Association in a freedmen's school in New Orleans. By December of that year, she had relocated roughly two hundred miles west to Vermillionville in order to escape the violence in New Orleans. "After the horrible riots in New Orleans in July," Highgate wrote to Reverend M.E. Strieby, "I found my heart getting impaired from hospital visiting and excitement so I came here [Vermillionville] to do what I could and get stronger corporally, that I might enter fully into carrying light and knowledge into dark places." While Highgate reported that Northern politicians would have been "surprised" by the "adjustment of relations between employer and former slaves," there was, nonetheless, "much opposition" to her school:

Twice I have been shot at in my room. Some of my night-school scholars have been shot but none killed. A week ago an aged freedmen was shot so badly as to break his arm and leg—just across the way. The rebels here threatened to burn down the school and house in which I board before the first month passed. Yet they have not materially harmed us.<sup>4</sup>

Highgate's conclusion was rather remarkable. Local "rebels" had shot an unspecified number of her students, had attempted to assassinate Highgate twice, and had warned her that her school and home would be burnt to the ground—all because she had the temerity to believe that African Americans in Louisiana deserved an education. And yet, Highgate resolved in the midst of all the evidence to the contrary that she and her

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<sup>4</sup> Edmonia G. Highgate to Rev. M.E. Strieby, December 17, 1866, in American Missionary Association Archives, 1828-1969, Series 1, Box 58, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

students had not *really* been harmed. In the face of such violence, their work would continue.

For Wilson, Highgate, and millions of other black Southerners, schools provided African Americans a tangible link to the future through the promise to improve and elevate black children by means of an education. This chapter contends that black Southerners placed such an emphasis on racial advancement, in fact, that the school house and the spaces of learning came to be seen as essential to freedom. White Southerners, however, interpreted the freedmen's schools as a route to social and political equality and, eventually, integration. As a result, white Southerners threatened and assaulted both students and teachers in an effort to eliminate the means of learning. In turn, white terrorists resorted to demolishing the educational infrastructure: school houses, school books, writing utensils, and more. All told, such violence aimed at controlling whose vision of the future would come to fruition in the postbellum South. Despite high levels of violence, however, it was impossible to physically stifle African American's desires to educate their children because learning processes transcended space and could persist well beyond the school house.

Racial violence directed against African American students, teachers, and schoolhouses was persistent in the postbellum South. Reports poured in from all quarters as Freedmen's Bureau agents, black newspapers, missionaries, and other concerned witnesses testified that white Southerners had resorted to violence and terrorism to destroy black aspirations to quality education. Black schoolhouses and teachers, tangible representations of progress for African Americans, became obvious targets. In early

1868, Bureau agents from both Bowling Green, Kentucky, and Paducah, Kentucky, reported that they had located a number of sites where schoolhouses might be built, but that military protection would be required if they were to remain operational.<sup>5</sup> Such an assessment supported the claims that Charles Johnson, a local Bureau agent in Bowling Green, had made in late 1866. According to Johnson, white citizens in his district were decidedly against the existence of the freedmen's schools: "There is no assistance received from the whites, on the contrary a universal opposition to the education of the Freedmen."<sup>6</sup> In April 1868 that "universal opposition" manifested itself in a letter sent by local Ku Klux Klan members to Mrs. L. A. Baldwin, a teacher at a local black school in Bowling Green. Alongside an outline of a coffin, the Klan attached an ominous message: "BLOOD! POISON! POWDER! TORCH! *Leave in five days, or hell's your portion!*"<sup>7</sup> Far too often these threats became a brutal reality. According to an 1871 gathering of black Kentuckians in Frankfort, white incendiaries had led a violent campaign against black education in recent years and torched myriad schoolhouses and educational exhibits throughout central Kentucky. "We find their [the white terrorists] deeds," the committee concluded, "are perpetrated only upon colored men and white Republicans....We ask, how long is this state of things to last!"<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. House, Committee on Freedmen's Affairs, *Freedmen's Affairs in Kentucky and Tennessee: Report of Major General Carlin*, H.Ex.Doc.329, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1868) *Serial Set* 1346.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Johnson to John Ely, October 31, 1866, in Records of the Field Offices of the State of Kentucky, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872, Record Group 105, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, National Archives Microfilm Publication M1904 (hereafter cited as Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1904), reel no. 17. George Wright emphasized in his study of racial violence in Kentucky that African American attempts at education "offended many whites who viewed this as a step toward equality between the races." See Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and "Legal Lynchings"* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 34-35.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. House, Committee on Freedmen's Affairs, *Freedmen's Affairs in Kentucky and Tennessee*.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Senate, *Memorial of a Committee Appointed at a Meeting of Colored Citizens of Frankfort, Kentucky, and Vicinity, Praying Enactment of Laws for Better Protection of Life*, S.Mis.Doc.49 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1871), *Serial Set* 1467.

The implications of violence in the educational context were immediately apparent to both victims and perpetrators. For African Americans, school place violence directly placed the most vulnerable members of the black community, young children, in imminent danger. Whether the threat came from former slaveholders who refused to allow children to leave plantation duties to attend school, riotous mobs in New Orleans, or indiscriminate shots fired by white brigands into black schools, the personal safety of students was never guaranteed.

In addition to the risk of physical harm, black parents such as Douglass Wilson also recalled the heavy psychological burden that came with allowing their children to pursue an education. For the white citizens who resented these efforts, and the terrorists who perpetrated violent attacks against defenseless schools, such belligerence represented another prong in the effort to maintain social, political, and economic control of black bodies. Planters continually railed against the waste of educating agricultural workers, and they balked at the prospect of losing laborers for weeks and months at a time.<sup>9</sup> As in other instances, many white Southerners also rejected black education because it offered the hope of black material and intellectual achievement—and, for the more eschatologically-inclined, the apocalyptic prospect of racial and social equality.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, educational violence should be understood as part of a larger struggle to control whose vision of the future would come to fruition in the postbellum South.

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<sup>9</sup> See C.F. Hutchings to Lieutenant B.F. Burnham, December 10, 1865, in Records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Louisiana, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1864-1869, Record Group 105, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, National Archives Microfilm Publication M1026 (hereafter cited as Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1026), reel no. 2.

<sup>10</sup> For brief overviews of the difficulty of establishing equitable school systems in Kentucky and Louisiana, see Victor B. Howard, "The Struggle for Equal Education in Kentucky, 1866-1884," in *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Summer 1977), pp. 305-328; Howard A. White, *The Freedmen's Bureau in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 166-200.

Black resistance to school place violence would also shape the extent to which white terrorists would have to go in order to undermine African American education. Individual acts of violence that had proved effective at intimidating employees or physically restraining the newly emancipated, in short, were incapable of extinguishing the broader desire for education that most black Southerners possessed. Because the aspiration to learn transcended space and time, white brigands began to target the material goods and resources that were required to operate the freedmen's schools. While a threat or assault could prevent one student from attending one school for a certain period of time, these actions would need to be repeated perpetually in order to achieve the long-term goal of denying educational opportunities to black Southerners. In contrast, setting fire to a schoolhouse, or destroying books and writing utensils, could wreak havoc on the fragile infrastructure of the freedmen's schools and deprive entire parishes, counties, and regions of educational opportunities. Such actions constituted a decidedly new form of terror that white Southerners would resort to time and again during Reconstruction.

Viewed from the perspective of 1861, the development of black education in the South over the next decade would seem nothing short of remarkable. Outlawed in most of the slaveholding South on the eve of the Civil War, African American schools began to be established as the process of emancipation unfolded. The effort commenced as early as the first year of the war, when Northern philanthropic and missionary societies sent teachers into areas occupied by Union troops. As the war continued, these private efforts would be further bolstered by new Northern aid societies and substantially reinforced by the federal government through intermittent military attempts to educate

contrabands and freedpeople that, by 1865, were consolidated under the Freedmen's Bureau.<sup>11</sup> The establishment of black schools, in fact, was one of the most important functions that the Bureau carried out as part of its mission to integrate African Americans into free society.<sup>12</sup> The results, at least quantitatively, were very impressive. During the five-year period from 1866 to 1870, the Bureau managed to operate 4,239 schools, hire 9,307 teachers, and teach 247,333 students.<sup>13</sup> State-sponsored schools for black children were also planned and organized across the South during Radical Reconstruction, but white Southerners firmly denied African American requests for integration and operated black schools on a legally segregated basis for the next century.<sup>14</sup> By 1870, the effective

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<sup>11</sup> One of the great myths of Reconstruction is that the vast majority of the teachers that taught at freedmen's school during Reconstruction were Northern white women working through missionary societies and other charitable organizations. While these women were undoubtedly active throughout the South, African American men and women (as well as white men) were present in large numbers at the government schools that formed the backbone of black education during Reconstruction. For an excellent quantitative study of the freedmen's teachers, see Ronald E. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). Butchart's earlier work also details the relationship between the freedmen and Northern schools, see *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen's Education, 1862-1875* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980).

<sup>12</sup> William P. Vaughan, *Schools for All: The Blacks and Public Education in the South, 1865-1877* (Lexington: The University of Press of Kentucky, 1974), 1-23. The connections between the Bureau schools and those formed by missionary groups such as the American Missionary Association were so close during the early years of Reconstruction that they have sometimes been referred to as the "bureau-association" schools. By 1867, however, the private associations were suffering from severe declines in donations that rendered it impossible for them to continue their work in the same capacity. Aided by Congressional appropriations, the Freedmen's Bureau operated schools for the freedpeople until April 1870 when they essentially turned over their remaining infrastructure to the various states. For the sake of simplicity and continuity, I refer to these schools throughout as "Bureau" schools.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, *We Ask Only for Even-Handed Justice*, 91-93. As should be expected, many federal officials and white Northerners that traveled to the South had far different expectations for what education would ultimately mean for the freedpeople than African Americans did themselves. Whereas black Southerners envisioned education as a pathway to full citizenship, whites often viewed such expectations as unrealistic. Christopher M. Span's recent work on black education in Mississippi explores the tension that resulted from these competing visions, as well as the efforts of white Mississippians to stymie any attempts at black education after the Civil War. See Span, *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse: African American Education in Mississippi, 1862-1875* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Vaughan, *Schools for All*. Somewhat remarkably, the only major successful case of public school integration during Reconstruction occurred in New Orleans during the 1870s. The architect behind the "experiment" was Thomas W. Conway, the state Superintendent of Education, and former head of the Freedmen's Bureau in Louisiana. Importantly, Conway received the support of Louisiana's powerful free black community that had pushed for integrated education for years. White attendance at public schools in New Orleans during the first years that they operated on an integrated basis, but by the mid-1870s several

end of the Bureau's involvement in the education of the freedmen and the shift to state-funded schools, it is estimated that nearly one-fourth of black children of school-age attended a public school in the South.<sup>15</sup> For hundreds of thousands of black Southerners, these changes represented a transformative step in the process of securing American citizenship.

The formal creation of African American schools that began during the Civil War built upon a much longer history of educational efforts undertaken by the enslaved, and even some white slaveholders, during the antebellum period. Although nearly every Southern state prohibited the instruction of the enslaved, these statutes were ignored by many white Southerners until the early 1830s. After Nat Turner's failed revolt in 1831, however, white Southerners developed a more universally suspicious view of black education. Nineteenth-century Americans had long identified the close connections between education, literacy, and freedom, and Turner's uprising, alongside an earlier movement led by Denmark Vesey, convinced the slaveholding South that education and literacy would arouse feelings of self-assertion and rebellion among the enslaved.<sup>16</sup> The

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thousand white children were enrolled. Although important, the integration of New Orleans' public schools was anomalous in the postbellum South, and therefore not representative of the conditions across the region. See Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 367; Louis R. Harlan, "Desegregation in New Orleans Public Schools During Reconstruction," in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (Apr., 1962), pp. 663-675.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, *We Ask Only for Even-Handed Justice*, 91-92. Other historians have phrased such figures in a different manner in order to emphasize that educational progress was agonizingly slow. Eric Foner, for instance, wrote that "in 1880...70 percent of the [South's] black population remained illiterate." See Foner, *Reconstruction*, 366.

<sup>16</sup> Beth Barton Schweiger, "The Literate South: Reading Before Emancipation," in *The Journal of the Civil War Era*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Sept., 2013), pp. 341-342. Schweiger explores the reality that, while there few public schools in the antebellum South, literacy rates were among the highest in the world. She also questions the long-held American ideal that literacy would breed progress and freedom, arguing that most slaves that achieved literacy remained in bondage until the Civil War. Despite the allure of these arguments, it is undeniably true that black Southerners that lived through the antebellum period and into Reconstruction placed a great deal of faith in the potential of literacy and education. While there are clear modern distinctions between education and literacy, I have relied on the use of "education" throughout to maintain consistency and more clearly relate the connotations that nineteenth-century Americans associated with the process of going to school and becoming literate—or, to obtain an "education."

instruction of the enslaved continued throughout the 1840s and 1850s on a more sporadic basis—and individuals such as Frederick Douglass, for example, famously exemplified the belief that education was the route to both mental and physical freedom—but structured education declined steadily until the outbreak of the Civil War.<sup>17</sup> In 1860, it is estimated that between five and ten percent of the Southern black population, both free and enslaved, was literate.<sup>18</sup>

As emancipation unfolded, black Southerners evinced the desire to build upon these earlier foundations and declared that it was now the right and duty of all African Americans to pursue educational endeavors. In late April 1865, the New Orleans *Black Republican* charged that “Freedom and schools, books and newspapers, go hand in hand. Let us secure the freedom we have received by the intelligence that can maintain it.”<sup>19</sup> Earlier that month, in announcing their mission, the editors of the *Black Republican* unequivocally declared that slavery had amounted to intellectual darkness, and that African Americans must throw off these chains and embrace the new opportunities before them. “We have been outraged,” the editorial began. “Our intellects have been chained as well as our bodies. Indeed, our very souls were not our own. It was a crime to teach us. We dared not hold a book in our hands. We were dragged through the streets and into the jails, without cause, and with no chance at justice.” Although the editors

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<sup>17</sup> For two recent works that examine the complexities of race and antebellum education, see Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Hilary J. Moss, *Schooling Citizens: The Struggle for African American Education in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). One of the more poignant statements that Frederick Douglass made in regards to slavery and education was in his 1845 autobiography. Quoting Mr. Auld, Douglass wrote: “Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world....It would forever unfit him to be a slave.” In his own words, Douglass later claimed that “education and slavery were incompatible with each other.” See Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (Dublin, Ireland: Webb and Chapman, GT., 1846), 33, 37.

<sup>18</sup> Vaughan, *Schools for All*, 1-3.

<sup>19</sup> New Orleans *Black Republican*, April 29, 1865.



believed that many changes had occurred for the better in recent years, the “serpent” of slavery was not quite dead:

He is weakened, but not captured or overcome. The heel must bruise his head and crush it. This will be done by us, not with the sword, not with words, newspapers or orations, but by our life, our conduct, our own very faithfulness to the freedom we have commenced to enjoy. Honesty, industry, temperance, religion, education, truthfulness—these will be the virtues that will make us strong...<sup>20</sup>

This idealistic interpretation of education would be repeated time and again across the postbellum South.

At the First Colored Convention of Kentucky held in March 1866, delegates declared that it was critical that the freedmen pursue an education in order to stake their claims to the rights and duties of American citizenship. “Education,” the convention resolved, was “essential to the elevation and prosperity of any people.” Furthermore, the delegates dedicated themselves to “labor to the utmost of our poor ability to infuse into the minds of Colored Fellow Citizens, the desire to educate themselves and their children.”<sup>21</sup> Many literate black men who were serving in the Union armies also claimed that African American troops needed an education in order to perform their duties as non-commissioned officers and participate equitably in free society. John Sweeney, a sergeant from Green County, Kentucky, wrote to General Clinton B. Fisk in October 1865 and urged that more be done to educate both the troops and the black populace at large. According to Sweeney, during a recent furlough he had been shocked at the “ill treatment on the account of the lack of Education [among black Kentuckians, they] being

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, April 15, 1865.

<sup>21</sup> *Proceedings of the First Convention of Colored Men of Kentucky, Held in Lexington, March the 22d, 23d, 24th and 26th, 1866 with the Constitution of the Kentucky State Benevolent Association* (Louisville: Civill and Calvert Printing, 1866), 21-26.

incapable of putting Thier complaints or applications in writing. For the want of Education totally ignorant Of the Great Good Workings of the Government in our behalf.”<sup>22</sup> One month later, J.R. Reasoner, a chaplain serving with the 119<sup>th</sup> U.S.C.T., worried that upon discharge the men in the ranks would simply return to their former masters and “would be virtually under a worse system of servitude than that from which they have just emerged. If taught to read and write...when he is discharged, [he] will take his family and go where he can be an independent man.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in the early years of Reconstruction it seemed that black Southerners possessed a nearly “blind faith” that education would “empower and elevate their race.”<sup>24</sup>

The reaction of white Southerners to these demands for black educational opportunities varied greatly over time and space, but some general patterns emerged. In chronological terms, the Southern states did establish state-sponsored schools for both black and white children during Reconstruction, but foot-dragging and a hostility to increased taxes delayed their implementation until after the demise of the Bureau schools.<sup>25</sup> In the period under consideration in this chapter, mainly the Bureau’s tenure

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<sup>22</sup> “Kentucky Black Sergeant to the Tennessee Freedmen’s Bureau Assistant Commissioner,” in *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, Series II, The Black Military Experience*, eds., Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie P. Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 615-616.

<sup>23</sup> “Chaplain of a Kentucky Black Regiment to the Adjutant General of the Army,” in *Ibid.*, 630-631.

<sup>24</sup> Smith, *We Ask Only for Even-Handed Justice*, 91.

<sup>25</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 354-368. As Foner noted, the Republican-controlled governments that hoped to create a “modern, centralized” educational system “modeled on the most advanced educational thinking in the North” quickly discovered that it was impossible to meet the expense of “building a school system virtually from scratch.” In addition, the traditions of local control and low taxes meant that white Southerners roundly rejected the presence of an activist state that prioritized black education. See also Robert C. Morris, *Reading, Writing, and Reconstruction: The Education of the Freedmen in the South, 1861-1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). The defeated Confederate states took up the question of public education in 1868-1869 during the constitutional conventions necessitated by Reconstruction. The Louisiana Constitution of 1868 provided for publically-funded schools that prohibited segregated schools, and in New Orleans substantial integration was achieved during beginning in 1870. In 1874, a series of riots seriously threatened the integrated schools in the city, and by 1877 they were no longer effective. Outside of New Orleans, however, very little racial integration occurred. See Vaughan, *Schools for All*, 78-102. Since Kentucky did not leave the Union, it was left to the legislature to propose

from 1865 to 1870, white violence against freedmen's schools appears to have waned in intensity as time went on, especially after 1868.<sup>26</sup> Although much of the evidence collected by the Bureau is anecdotal rather than methodical, there are several probable reasons for this slight decline. First, white Southerners complained most vociferously about the racial integration of schoolhouses and the larger educational system. Physical proximity, as in other avenues of life, smacked of social and civil proximity in the educational setting. In the Bureau schools, integration often meant that white educators, many of them from the North, taught black students—an arrangement that many white terrorists would not accept. As Reconstruction progressed, the increased literacy of the freedmen meant that many black Southerners made the transition from student to teacher. If white Southerners were not exactly enthused about continuing education for the freedpeople, they may have been more inclined to accept schoolhouses that were not integrated.<sup>27</sup>

More systematically, the gradual withdrawal of the private missionary societies, especially after 1867, led to a slackening of racial terrorism that was directed against the freedmen's schools because white terrorists believed that they had already accomplished

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public schools for black children. They finally approved state funding for African American education in 1874. See Howard, "The Struggle for Equal Education in Kentucky, 1866-1884."

<sup>26</sup> Other scholars have argued that violence against teachers and schoolhouses intensified in 1867 after the introduction of the Radical's legislative program. See Vaughan, *Schools for All*, 35-36. Vaughan was more directly arguing about violence against teachers for the private missionary societies such as the AMA. My research has indicated there was a great deal of continuity between 1865 and 1867 and that it was only by the late 1860s that violence against schools started to decline. Nevertheless, this "decline" was hardly linear and is more helpful in determining the general attitude of white Southerners towards black schools than explaining individual incidents.

<sup>27</sup> See "Monthly Report of Sub-Assistant Commissioner (or Agent), Parish of St. Landry, State of Louisiana, October 1868," November 1, 1868, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 3. The report appears to have been signed by Ira B. Sutton, and the word "Assistant" written before "Sub-Assistant Commissioner" directly on the form. A list of the Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioners serving in November 1868, however, does not contain his name. In any case, Sutton's response to as to the "public sentiment" of whites to educating the freedmen was as follows: "The people will not oppose schools for Freedmen if col'd teachers are employed."

what they had set out to do. In other words, the inability of the private associations to sustain their educational endeavors in the face of rampant violence reduced the animosity that white Southerners held against the freedmen's schools because the alleged Northern interlopers and outside agitators had been rebuffed in their mission to remake Southern society.<sup>28</sup> By the late-1860s, Bureau officials had also realized that it was extremely difficult to operate black schools, especially in rural areas, unless military protection could realistically be obtained. These earlier experiences with violent whites, combined with incessant shortages of both funding and manpower, meant that the Bureau consolidated its gains where it could during the final years of its existence rather than continuing to establish schools in new parishes or counties. The result was a fairly uneven distribution of schoolhouses. Whereas one county might possess adequate infrastructure, a neighboring county with a larger black population might be entirely devoid of any Bureau influence.<sup>29</sup> On an individual basis, of course, such trends were imperceptible. If less schoolhouses were burned or fewer students assaulted in 1870 than 1866, the individual consequences in specific locales remained cataclysmic.

Violent responses to black schools were also shaped by the rural and urban divides of the South. Although this chapter will focus nearly exclusively on rural schools because of the extent of the racial violence that was directed against them, it is important to keep in mind that urban schools were also targeted by white terrorists. Still, the freedmen's schools that operated in urban areas were able to avoid some of the worst excesses that plagued the rural, isolated schoolhouses throughout the Southern backcountry. In logistical terms, the most important development was the ability of

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<sup>28</sup> Vaughan, *Schools for All*, 16-17.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

teachers and Bureau officials more carefully to select where the urban schools should be located. The federal government did not have unlimited funds to rent any building that educators might desire, but nevertheless it was easier to find better options in Southern cities than it was in the rural South—with the dilapidated barns and spare buildings that former slaveholders begrudgingly rented at exorbitant prices to the Bureau.

The presence of the federal government, and that of the Union Army, was also more visible in Southern cities and it was much more likely that violent offenders would be apprehended and tried in federal court. In fact, in urban environments such as New Orleans, the frustrations most consistently voiced by the African American community were the lack of public money spent on black schools and the failure of the state legislatures to provide a feasible solution to this perpetual problem.<sup>30</sup> All of this is not meant to suggest that blacks in places such as New Orleans and Louisville, Kentucky, were able to peacefully attend school on a daily basis. The vignettes that open this chapter, after all, are a stark reminder that events anywhere in the South could turn deadly in a matter of seconds. If urban school place violence was less common than its rural counterpart, it nonetheless shared many of the characteristics that made such violence so insidious and effective at limiting black educational opportunities.

As in so many other aspects of life in the postbellum South, the gulf between black and white expectations over the future of education in the region would lead to

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<sup>30</sup> In October 1867, for example, the New Orleans *Tribune* denounced the whites in the city, even most Republicans, who favored “race” schools instead of “common” schools. According to the *Tribune*, these “rebel schools” were the last resort of white Southerners who had failed to stop emancipation, the enlistment of black troops, and the extension of suffrage to black men. “The rebels see that common schools will in the course of time obliterate the line of demarkation [*sic*] between rebels and loyalists,” the editorial concluded, and it would be “the last blow to the teaching of sectional sentiments....Now let them understand by the breaking up of their schools that they will not be allowed to raise a class of rebel children.” See New Orleans *Tribune*, October 24, 1867.

devastating violence. News traveled surprisingly quickly, and reports of racial terrorism were carried far and wide in the black press. In September 1866, the New Orleans *Tribune* commented on the violent campaign of Alvin Duvall for the office of clerk of the Kentucky Court of Appeals. “The Kentuckians,” the *Tribune* began, “Mr. Duvall’s supporters, have been burning the schoolhouses of the freedmen and committing other outrages not altogether in the interest of education.”<sup>31</sup> Throughout Reconstruction, the violence that black Southerners confronted in the quest to obtain an education was severe and widespread. That so many persevered in the face of such adversity is a testament to their faith in the power of education—and a sad reminder of the true extent and cost of racial terrorism in the postbellum South.

And yet, the cold reality remained that the educational system that African Americans and their allies developed for the freedmen in the rural South during the first years of Reconstruction was often haphazard, consistently underfunded, and nearly always on the brink of its demise due to white intransigence and violence. Simple logistical concerns meant that “schoolhouses” were often converted spare rooms, homes, churches, or barns, and federal officials and teachers quickly realized that a large number of local schools would need to be established, and financed, in order to reach a population that was largely denied mobility—at times legally, and often materially, due to a lack of financial resources. In these circumstances, even a small development such as an unexpectedly cold day could have a major influence on a school’s operation. In Ascension Parish, Louisiana, Porter S. Campbell, Principal of No. 3 School, reported in

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<sup>31</sup> New Orleans *Tribune*, September 2, 1866; Anne E. Marshall, “‘The Rebel Spirit in Kentucky’: The Politics of Readjustment in a Border State, 1865-1868,” in Paul Alan Cimbala and Randall M. Miller, eds., *The Great Task Remaining Before Us: Reconstruction as America’s Continuing Civil War* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 60-62.

December 1865 that the “house [the school] is such a miserable concern that in cold weather it is impossible for the children to live in.” On warm days he estimated that around 70 students attended regularly; on cold days, that number dropped to roughly fifteen.<sup>32</sup>

Fiscal concerns were also paramount. In December 1866, R.E. Johnston reported that the Freedmen’s Bureau office in Lexington, Kentucky, had only been able to provide \$30 the previous November to operate schools in the district that employed 12 black teachers and served 410 students: out of a total expenditure of \$1,392 by the Bureau, \$1,362.15 had been paid in tuition by the freedmen. If this source of income dried up, the schools would undoubtedly be closed.<sup>33</sup> Even though such material hardships and monetary shortages could hardly be blamed directly on racial terrorism, they speak forcefully to the precarious existence of the freedmen’s schools. Balanced as they were on a razor’s edge between success and failure, black schools—and teachers and students—proved highly susceptible to white violence.

All of these material and logistical issues were exacerbated in rural areas. In order to effectively reach the freedmen, many schoolhouses were established on, or near, plantations to make it more convenient for large numbers of black children to attend. Although perhaps practical in one sense, this solution presented a number of potential problems. For the teachers who ventured into these rural areas, the feeling of isolation and ostracism from the white community could be severe. Often singled-out as traitors to their race, many white teachers found it extremely difficult to rent rooms and buildings

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<sup>32</sup> Porter S. Campbell, “Report of School No. 3, R.B. Ascension, Dec. 1<sup>st</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> [1865]”, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 4.

<sup>33</sup> R.E. Johnston to John Ely, December 1866, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 17.

from white planters who were reluctant to be labelled supporters of the Freedmen's Bureau, and the freedmen's schools, by their neighbors.<sup>34</sup> Left largely to their own devices to manage daily operations, rural teachers were also more susceptible to the threats of verbal intimidation and physical harm than educators in urban settings. For the freedmen, many of whom were agricultural workers, it was nearly impossible to raise even the small sums of money needed to purchase the tuition tickets that helped keep the schoolhouse doors open when Bureau funds were insufficient.<sup>35</sup> Reports of teachers that had not been paid for months were common, and the allocation of scarce resources was always a point of contention in Bureau communication. The physical proximity of black schools to plantations also meant that former slaveholders, and current employers, could more easily surveil the premises and intervene to keep children from attending school when there was an urgent need for their labor.

In October 1865, E.M. Larkin, director of freedmen's schools in rural Washington and St. Tammany Parishes, Louisiana, described some of these obstacles in more concrete terms. According to Larkin, it was doubtful if even one government school could be organized in Washington Parish, as the locale was in the "gall of bitterness & in the bind of iniquity." As far as Larkin was concerned, it was evident that local whites

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<sup>34</sup> A number of factors could influence how a particular teacher was received by the local populace, among them the gender, age, and race of the specific individual, and also whether or not a viable military presence remained in the area. Due to the wide disparity in how specific educators were treated, it is difficult to make generalized statements concerning the difficulties that, as a group, these teachers confronted. As Reconstruction progressed, one interesting development was the apparent preference of white Southerners that African Americans should teach at the government schools throughout the rural South, and not whites. See John B. Sutton, "Monthly Report of Sub-Assistant Commissioner (or Agent)," November 1, 1868, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 3.

<sup>35</sup> The sale of tuition tickets was not a universal practice, but it was extremely common because of the lack of federal funding to Bureau schools. Without the material assistance that the freedmen provided, in tuition fees but also in other ways such as boarding teachers and donating building to serve as schoolhouses, the Bureau would have functioned far less efficiently. See White, *The Freedmen's Bureau in Louisiana*, 166-200.



continued to act as though the “slave laws” were still enforced, and the freedmen were regularly and repeatedly whipped or driven entirely out of the parish when a season’s crops had been harvested. Furthermore, the black population was so sparse—and the planters firmly against perceived intrusions from the Freedmen’s Bureau—that “the colored people were too scattered for a school.” “The people throughout these parishes,” Larkin persisted, “are bitterly hostile to our attempt to educate & elevate the negro. There is a general feeling that slavery is still in a modified form to exist.” Compounding matters further was the apparent belief among the white population that the complete Union victory earlier in the year had not truly brought an end to the Civil War. “I have been asked if I believed Confederate money would be good again,” Larkin concluded, and a “combination is not improbable to refuse work to the negro in order to starve him into his old relation.”<sup>36</sup>

For educators who were able to establish freedmen’s schools in the rural South, the most common experience with white terrorists amounted to verbal threats and intimidation. Given the near-universal opposition to black education among the white populace, and the striking tendency of the former rebels to resort to violence, it is hardly surprising that most teachers took these threats seriously and reported them to Bureau officials. It was also typical for whites to intimidate individuals engaged in establishing freedmen’s schools. In November 1865, P.B. Randolph telegraphed Captain H.R. Pease in New Orleans to relate his travails in Thibodaux, Lafourche Parish. “I have succeeded so far with the Petition [to organize the school],” Randolph began, but he had run into trouble with angry white Louisianans. “The work is dangerous, my life is threatened and

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<sup>36</sup> E.M. Larkin to Captain H.R. Pease, October 7, 1865, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 3.

I think may be taken.” Still, the excitement for schools in the nearby villages of St. Charles, Houma, and Brashear was “intense,” and Randolph declared that he would go on if Pease so desired.<sup>37</sup> A month earlier, Alfred J. Rose had written to Pease from Madisonville with a similar message. Speaking to a man who had been a friend before the war, Rose claimed that he had been warned that there was nothing wrong with making money from a scheme to educate the freedmen, but that soon local whites would have control of the state and “the people do not want to pay taxes for educating the Negroes. Look out,” Rose’s friend cautioned, “for some of these wild fellows will shoot you full of holes.”<sup>38</sup>

Across the postbellum South, the situation was similar as countless individuals risked their lives in the effort to support black education. Irad Dunn, a freedman living near Camp Dick Robinson, Kentucky, had lost everything as a result of his stature within the local community. According to the local Bureau agent in early 1868, Dunn was “a most excellent man, treasurer of a society among the black men for the promotion of education and the care of colored paupers.” For this, white brigands had threatened his life and driven him off “his place...[he] is now skulking about, living from hand to mouth, for the sin of being connected with an organization to promote education and alleviate misery among his own race.” Despite the desperate need for federal troops, local blacks and Unionists often advised against sending “any soldiers to protect them; for fear, as they say, that when the soldiers are taken away vengeance will be visited upon them.” As long as local rebels believed that the Civil Rights Acts would be supported

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<sup>37</sup> P.B. Randolph to Captain H.R. Pease, Telegram, November 25, 1865, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 2.

<sup>38</sup> Alfred J. Rose to Captain H.R. Pease, October 25, 1865, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1026, reel no.2. Emphasis in original.

and enforced by the Bureau, it was possible to achieve a semblance of law and order, “but they have discovered that the United States civil authorities are powerless without the sword, and they believe that the military will not come to the rescue.” For black Kentuckians, this state of affairs was ominous and foreboding. “All this is humiliating,” the report concluded, “but it is true, and I repeat again that the bureau officers are not responsible for this condition of affairs, and they cannot prevent it.”<sup>39</sup>

The sheer volume of verbal threats directed at educators, both black and white, points to several important elements of school place violence. First, racial terrorism in an educational setting was often more impersonal and “generalized” than violence in other avenues of life.<sup>40</sup> The violence of emancipation, the workplace, and the household was normally very personal, and grew out of long periods of interaction between victim and perpetrator—in many cases these relationships spanned the era of the Civil War and included years on either side of the conflict. When a white employer whipped an employee who they had formally enslaved, for instance, such an action was meant to both recreate the antebellum social order and dictate the terms of black freedom moving forward. In other words, it was violence rooted in a practical and psychological context that was both historical and contemporary. As such, this violence evoked incredible

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<sup>39</sup> U.S. House, Committee on Freedmen’s Affairs, *Freedmen’s Affairs in Kentucky and Tennessee*.

<sup>40</sup> This phenomenon is difficult to explain, and it really only makes sense when educational violence is compared to everyday racial violence in other aspects of life during Reconstruction. The conclusion that school place violence was “more impersonal” than household assaults or labor violence, however, should not be interpreted as a something that made it fundamentally different. Although the construction remains a bit awkward, it is perhaps more illustrative to note that white terrorists hoped to attack and demolish the entire educational system, thus denying the freedmen any opportunities whatsoever to attend school. If individual teachers, students, and administrators suffered the brunt of this violence, they were nonetheless perceived as “secondary” targets. When a white employer whipped a black employee, quite obviously, there was little expectation that such violence would destroy the structure of negotiated labor agreements that characterized agricultural work in the South. Specific attacks, therefore, were attempts to redefine a distinct relationship at a given time.

symbolic power for, and could be easily understood by, black and white Southerners who made connections between postbellum violence and antebellum social relations.

The teachers that Northern missionary societies and the Freedmen's Bureau sent into the rural South, especially Northern whites, however, represented something entirely new in Southern society. It was impossible, therefore, for white Southerners to rely on established patterns of violence. A white man might claim the right to enter a freedman's house on the grounds that he had exercised that prerogative as a slaveholder and a white man—but what were these same men to do with these educators, sometimes white women, who moved into their communities to open schools for the freedmen? With little precedent on which to act, white Southerners first turned to threats and verbal harassment in their dealings with these outsiders and alleged racial traitors.

The notion that freedmen's teachers were simply interlopers hoping to profit at the expense of the white South was another common thread of schoolhouse violence. Of the threats that were made and reported to the Freedmen's Bureau, most evinced the belief that things would return to the way they had been once the outside "agitators" and "trouble-makers" were driven from the community. The mistrust of strangers, and the archetypal unattached men, was already pervasive in the white South by the time of Reconstruction, and it was fairly easy to brand these newcomers as similarly unwanted and unworthy.<sup>41</sup> In the October 1865 letter that Alfred J. Rose sent to Captain H.R.

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<sup>41</sup> The basis of such fears during the antebellum period stemmed from the belief that unattached white men could develop relationships with the enslaved that would potentially damage the racially-defined society that was undergirded by slavery. Even more troublesome was the prospect that these white men could entice enslaved African Americans to flee from their owners, thus throwing an ordered, supposedly stable set of social relations into chaos. If the stakes were not quite as high after the Civil War for white Southerners, the tendency to blame outsiders for causing trouble among "their" former slaves was very much alive. For an excellent recent work that analyzes the violent consequences of one such perceived outsider during the 1830s, see Joshua Rothman, *Flush Times, Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2012).

Pease, quoted above, Rose reported further threats made to a carpenter, Daniel Rigs, who had been contracted to build a schoolhouse for the Bureau. According to Rose, he had sent Rigs into the countryside to purchase “lumber for school purposes” at a local sawmill. While there, the owners of the sawmill, “Mr. and Mrs. Dunkin, told him that if Mr. Rose dared put up a school either in Covington or Washington Parish, that the people would tar and Feather him and ride him on a rail.” When asked for what purpose he wanted to purchase the timber, Rigs claimed that he intended to fabricate some shelving, as he feared that “they would not let him have the lumber” if they knew it was to build a school for the freedmen.<sup>42</sup>

Although often portrayed comically in modern American culture, the practice of tarring and feathering was particularly brutal and riven with political meaning in the nineteenth century South.<sup>43</sup> In Rose’s case, the sawmill owners’ threats had made the white community’s position unmistakably clear: by physically removing his person from the immediate vicinity through the highly symbolic act of riding him on a rail, whites would excise the outsider and extinguish the local effort to educate the freedmen before it had even begun.

Viewed together, these two characteristics of school place violence highlight yet another common white supremacist belief regarding black education. In short, most white Southerners conceded that, in theory, some amount of schooling for African American children could be beneficial for future employers and employees; but, they

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<sup>42</sup> Alfred J. Rose to H.R. Pease, October 25, 1865, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1026, reel no.2.

<sup>43</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 462-489. Wyatt-Brown examines the tarring-and-feathering of James Foster, Jr. in Natchez, Mississippi, in 1834 as a community ritual whereby citizens symbolically removed the accused wife-killer from their presence by publically shaming and desecrating Foster’s person.

flatly rejected the notion that any such instruction should occur in their hometown.<sup>44</sup> In both the monthly reports that Bureau agents filed from rural parishes across Louisiana, and the teacher's monthly school reports completed by educators at specific freedmen's schools, one of the standard questions asked the respondents to gauge the "public sentiment" toward schools for the freedmen and poor whites. By the late-1860s, white animosity towards these institutions, in general, had slackened somewhat, but planters and other whites of means appear to have become resigned to the idea of black schools while still refusing to offer any positive support.

In August 1868, Edward Mitchell, teacher at a school on Vick's Plantation in Lafourche Parish, Louisiana, simply claimed that white attitudes towards the schools were "good if at a distance," but he could gain little sustenance from the local population for his operation. Mitchell's remarks substantiated a report filed in February 1868 by E.H. Hosner, Bureau agent in Plaquemines Parish, Right Bank, in which Hosner complained that the schools could not function without more federal assistance. "The public sentiment seems to be," Hosner began, "that the freedmen would be better off educated...but it is very difficult to get any to subscribe or donate anything for school purposes." When asked how the Bureau might more successfully operate schools for

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<sup>44</sup> Educational developments across the South were extremely disparate during the years of Reconstruction. It is rather common for historians to make comparisons between the urban South and the rural South, but the reality was that a great deal of divergence could exist between neighboring counties or towns in the countryside. E.M. Larkin's letter, cited above, that described conditions in St. Tammany and Washington Parishes, Louisiana, was an example of this development, and other government officials noted similar trends. In April 1868, for instance, Bureau officials in Kentucky reported that "except in the Danville district, the freedmen have been doing well during the month....In the Danville district the change has been for the worse. Outrage and disorder is the rule." See U.S. House, Committee on Freedmen's Affairs, *Freedmen's Affairs in Kentucky and Tennessee*.

blacks and poor whites, Hosner replied in the same manner for months on end: “pay teachers.”<sup>45</sup>

Delicately poised as these schools often were on the brink of catastrophe, it was hardly surprising that threats and intimidation proved so successful at limiting black educational efforts. In December 1865, John C. Tucker, City Superintendent of Schools in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, reported to Captain H.R. Pease that nearly all of his teachers had left the area as a result of the “abuse and insults from these ‘Loyal’ Citizens every day.” According to Tucker, the main problem was that “Southern teachers” had been assigned to the freedmen’s schools, and they were not accustomed to facing their neighbor’s vitriol. “Can you not send me Northern young Ladies, or Men,” Tucker continued, “Those who can fight these rebels (in their way), as they fight the devil himself.” That Tucker couched the effort to start the freedmen’s schools in both eschatological and martial terms was revealing, and it illustrated the stakes for all involved. As Tucker personally attested, it was the willingness of ex-Confederates in Baton Rouge to make good on their threats that made them so effective. “I have not only endured insults,” Tucker wrote, “but have been assaulted in the street at night, and have had parties of men endeavor to break open my doors at midnight to satisfy their fiendish propensities.” While Tucker steeled his nerves to endure more ill-treatment, the three women that the Bureau had employed as teachers were not yet ready to give their life to the cause. Whatever else Pease decided, Tucker concluded, he must send individuals “with sufficient moral courage to teach in the col’d schools.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Edward Mitchell, “Teacher’s Monthly School Report,” August 1868, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 6; E.H. Hosner, “Monthly Report of Sub-Assistant Commissioner (or Agent),” February 1868, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 3.

<sup>46</sup> John C. Tucker to H.R. Pease, December 16, 1865, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 2.

Such qualifications were required across the postbellum South. Bureau agents in Kentucky reported similar levels of white hostility toward the freedmen's schools, and noted that local whites made every effort to obstruct and impede black education. In two reports filed in June 1868, James Bolton and W. James Kay, from Brandenburg and Elizabethtown, respectively, claimed that local whites strongly resented the Bureau schools and did everything in their power to frighten and intimidate the freedmen. A "large majority" of whites were "bitterly opposed" to educating the freedmen, Bolton communicated, and these people reiterated the belief that the schools were being forced on them by the might of the federal government. As for the planters who lived near Brandenburg, Bolton found no interest at all in educating either the freedmen or poor whites: the "leaders would prefer to have the ignorant remain so." Near Elizabethtown, Kay reported that the "majority of the white Citizens are opposed to the education of the Freedmen, and in fact will leave nothing undone to discourage them from educating their children."<sup>47</sup> Although Kay failed to elaborate, the news of burned schoolhouses, teachers openly assaulted on city streets, and roving bands of outlaws that outraged African Americans at will would undoubtedly have proven effective at limiting the establishment of black schools. Little else might be expected in a state where Bureau agents had already concluded that nothing short of the Union Army would be required to protect both schoolhouses and African American students from white terrorism.

For Bureau officials and teachers on the ground, of course, it was often difficult to separate verbal threats and the general hostility of local whites from more tangible risks

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<sup>47</sup> James Bolton, "Monthly Report of Sub-Assistant Commissioner (or Agent)," June 1868; W. James Kay, "Monthly Report of Sub-Assistant Commissioner (or Agent)," June 1868, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1904, reel no. 119.



to one's physical safety. In a meandering report that P.B. Randolph sent to Captain A.G. Struder in April 1866 to relate the condition of freedmen's schools in the parishes of Vermillion, Lafayette, and St. Martin's, Randolph described a spirit of terror and fear in rural Louisiana that made it nearly impossible to establish black schools. "In the villages that I visited I found the colored people desirous of having schools," Randolph began, but "the whites are opposed to the schools." While planters were uniformly against instituting freedmen's schools that would limit the available supply of labor, Randolph commented that "poor whites" were even more outspoken against the government's efforts.<sup>48</sup> These poorer whites were "intensely rebel in sentiment," Randolph continued, "hating all Yankees most heartily, disliking...the idea of schools for freedmen and [doing] all they dare to intimidate and frighten the blacks about the matter." The atmosphere was so "hostile" that Randolph feared that "teachers would have a very hard time out of the villages, and even in them." Ultimately, Randolph concluded that the reality was such that "the freedpeople of La Fayette [*sic*] and Vermillion are not yet free in fact: they are subjected and submit to violence, even to the extent of being assaulted in

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<sup>48</sup> It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine how social class influenced white perceptions of African American education, but it should be noted that federal policy, at least officially, often discussed the instruction of poor whites and the freedmen as though they were part and parcel of the same task. In Louisiana, a form question on the monthly reports submitted by teachers and Bureau agents read, "What is the public sentiment as to the education of the Freedmen and the Poor Whites?" For the month of November 1868, William Hollendock, an agent in Lafourche Parish, provided an answer that hundreds of other officers conveyed in similar terms: "Friendly towards the whites but as a general rule opposed to the Education of the Blacks." See Hollendock, "Monthly Report of Sub-Assistant Commissioner (or Agent)," December 8, 1868, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 3. This is merely suggestive, of course, but scholars have often noted that slavery provided a line of demarcation between the enslaved and poorer whites that allowed for social differentiation. With the emancipation of the enslaved, it is probable that poor whites rejected overtures by the Freedmen's Bureau to educate their children because of the Bureau's association with the formerly enslaved. This does not mean, however, that poor whites were responsible for the campaign of terrorism waged against African Americans during Reconstruction—this ignominy cut across all social lines. For an interesting, recent take on poor whites in the antebellum period, see David Brown, "A Vagabond's Tale: Poor Whites, Herrenvolk Democracy, and the Value of Whiteness in the Late Antebellum South," in *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 79, No. 4 (November 2013), pp. 799-840.

the church without resistance.”<sup>49</sup> In their efforts to prevent the establishment of freedmen’s schools in their neighborhoods, it was the willingness of white Southerners to act on their deadly threats that made verbal intimidation so effective.

Although physical assaults directed against teachers and other educators were less common than threats and verbal intimidation, the consequences of such attacks could be extremely severe. The escalation from potential to actualized violence was a step that not every white Southerner was prepared to take, and agents and teachers in the field were keenly aware that the Bureau did not have the resources to investigate every instance of verbal abuse. In December 1865, William Brennan, teacher at the Franklin Government School in Franklin, Louisiana, wrote to Captain H.R. Pease to relate what had occurred in the town since his arrival the previous October. Although a great deal of prejudice existed against the Bureau schools, Brennan stated that he had been able to enroll over 130 students who attended on a regular basis. For his success, Brennan had excited the ire of certain elements of the white populace: “I was insulted to day [*sic*], as I was passing along the street, as yet they have only manifested themselves by words, as far as I am concerned, but whether they will stop at that, or not, I cannot decide.” In any case, Brennan did not want to wait around and find out—if it could be done, Brennan begged Pease, he would like to be reassigned to another government school in New Orleans “as soon as possible and practicable.”<sup>50</sup>

That Southern whites were somewhat hesitant to attack teachers, educators, and Bureau officials is understandable. As noted above, these individuals represented

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<sup>49</sup> P.B. Randolph to Captain A.G. Struder, April 12, 1866, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 3.

<sup>50</sup> William Brennan to Captain H.R. Pease, December 2, 1865, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 2.

something decidedly new to white supremacists, and thus they were outside of the violent patterns of antebellum life that were often copied—although in a very different context—by terrorists and outlaws after the Civil War. It was also true that many of these people were white, and even though ex-Confederates railed against these race “traitors” and branded them as social pariahs, it remained true that African American leaders and educators were far more likely to be harassed, assaulted, or murdered than their white allies. Just as important, however, was the simple reality that teachers and Bureau agents were federal officials, and any physical attack against them was far more likely to draw a response that would place the perpetrator in federal court.<sup>51</sup> As boisterous and outspoken as white Southerners were, few cared to tangle directly with the might of the Union Army.<sup>52</sup>

It seems callous and against the republican ideals of human equality to note that governmental officials were more appalled by crimes against white officials and agents than the freedmen—but it was the cold truth. This can partly be attributed to the ingrained racial prejudices of much of the white North, but serious logistical obstacles should not be overlooked. Bureau records contain thousands of cases whereby federal officials investigated violent crimes and reported the matter to the civil authorities, but they could do little else.<sup>53</sup> Even when charges were brought at the state level, moreover,

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<sup>51</sup> The private teachers that were employed by organizations such as the American Missionary Association would not have been federal officials, but the relationship between these groups and the Freedmen’s Bureau was so close that it would have been more likely for them to receive backing from the federal government. See Vaughan, *Schools for All*, 1-23.

<sup>52</sup> This was a claim made repeatedly by both Bureau officials and soldiers who were stationed in various districts throughout the South. For an excellent insight into this dynamic, see United States Army Twenty-Fifth Colored Infantry Regiment Letterbook, 1869, Mss. 4912, Special Collections, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

<sup>53</sup> See Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 34. The “Records Relating to Murders and Outrages” begin at “Target 8.” There are thousands upon thousands of these claims spread throughout the records of

it was nearly impossible to prosecute whites who had outraged blacks due to bans against African American testimony and the sheer refusal of white juries to convict white defendants.<sup>54</sup> In other cases, local blacks refused to cooperate with Bureau officials and provide testimony because they rightly feared white retaliation once the federal presence was withdrawn from the area.<sup>55</sup> Combined with continuing racial bias, these factors severely restricted what was possible to accomplish through the legal process. All of this is not meant to suggest that teachers and officials were in any way free from the risk of physical harm; dire as the consequences might be, white Southerners did resort to corporeal violence when threats no longer appeared sufficient to the cause.

In late 1865, Lieutenant B.F. Burnham, 84<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry, reported one such assault on a teacher in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, to Captain H.R. Pease in New Orleans. The affair began when David Pollock, a teacher in the district, attempted to remove school property from a building that the Bureau had occupied near English Bend on land owned by one B. Myers. According to Burnham, while Pollock was “peaceably attempting to remove our school property from the premises,” Myers commenced assaulting the teacher. During the tussle, Myers “discharged at him [Pollock] a gun twice without hitting him.” While Pollock was thus engaged, two men employed by Myers rushed at the government teacher “and attacked him with a hand spike.” Although

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the Freedmen’s Bureau, but this specific collection archives a great many in one central location. Needless to say, the register outrages only contain a small number of the total outrages that were committed and reported.

<sup>54</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 420-421.

<sup>55</sup> Although it was rarely discussed in specific terms in Bureau communication, another important factor may have been the relative personal mobility of whites and blacks. White teachers and educators were able to request to be reassigned to different locations within the South, and it was also possible, for white Northerners, to return home. The same possibilities would have theoretically been available to black teachers that served in districts that were not their native county or parish, but the student population would have found it much harder to vacate an area when threats of violence evolved into direct physical confrontation.

Pollock suffered no life-threatening injuries, Burnham believed that the Bureau should pursue criminal charges against Myers. “I am informed,” Burnham continued, “that charges were brought against said Myers about two weeks since...for insulting our teacher in that district [Plaquemines Parish], Miss M. Stiner, but that the Parish Provost took no action in the premises.” To allow such actions to continue unabated would set a dangerous precedent, as Myers’ behavior had escalated from verbally abusing a female teacher to physically assaulting, and attempting to kill, another Bureau official. It was exactly the pattern of behavior that many teachers and school officials, like William Brennan, feared, even as they hoped it would never come to be. “Should his example pass unpunished,” Burnham concluded rather stoically, “no teacher or colored school will be safe in Plaquemines or St. Bernard Parishes.”<sup>56</sup>

If physical assaults against teachers were at least partially dissuaded by the reasons given here, no similar set of restrictions kept planters and former slaveholders from harassing and abusing the students who attended the government schools.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, attacks directed at black children—and adults who attended the night schools—were much less likely to be reported by Bureau officials and teachers because these outrages often occurred away from the schoolhouse. The rationale of planters,

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<sup>56</sup> Lieutenant B.F. Burnham to Captain H.R. Pease, November 17, 1865, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 2.

<sup>57</sup> Although this chapter has focused on black children as students, another important component of the African American educational system during Reconstruction was the operation of the “night schools” which were attended by adult freedmen. These schools did not reach as many individual learners, and the Freedmen’s Bureau did not routinely monitor or evaluate these institutions, but whites attacked the night schools the same as they did any other tangible evidence of black advancement. Edmonia Highgate’s letter that opens this chapter, for instance, related that her night scholar had been “shot at” on more than one occasion. See Barry A. Crouch, “Black Education in Civil War and Reconstruction Louisiana: George T. Ruby, the Army, and the Freedmen’s Bureau,” in *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (Summer, 1997), pp. 292. Crouch claimed that by early 1865, there were already roughly 20 night schools that were operating in southern Louisiana.

quite clearly, was that it was easier to corral their workforce by preventing black students from attending school at all. Open attacks against a school house during the day, while not unheard of, were much less common than physical attacks against black students who, under normal circumstances, would have attended the freedmen's schools. Bureau teachers were undoubtedly aware of this pervasive violence, but it was unrealistic to expect them to recount every such instance. As a result, thousands of reports are littered with suggestive language regarding the general hostility of whites and the refusal of white employers to allow their labor force to leave the farm in order to attend school, but only the most egregious examples of racial violence, or attacks that happened directly at the schoolhouse, made it into the official record.

Terrorizing black students also fit more easily into the white South's existing framework of racial violence, as slaveholders and planters had claimed the right to control black bodies and African American mobility for nearly two centuries. In this sense, whipping or physically restraining individual students, or shooting indiscriminately into a schoolhouse at night, were actions that white Southerners understood as necessary to controlling and coercing the black population. For both victim and perpetrator, this violence took on new meanings after emancipation. Slaveholders could no longer legally claim that they were merely disciplining their human property—and African Americans could now rightfully declare that they deserved an education the same as every other American citizen. School place violence, therefore, became much more than an effort to wrangle control over how black people would spend

their time: it was a contest over whose vision of the future would come to fruition in the South.<sup>58</sup>

With the stakes as high as they were, whites resorted to actions that were shocking even in the context of the postbellum South. In an 1865 letter to Thomas W. Conway, E.W. Wheelock conveyed the testimony of Martha Stiner, a teacher at a government school in St. Bernard Parish, concerning the “gross abuses” of the freedmen in her district. Stiner affirmed that although children from four plantations were expected to attend her school, they were unable to do so because of the treatment they received. On a plantation owned by a man named Morgan, Stiner continued, there was a punishment “termed baking in the Sweat box. This consists in putting the colored offender in a box made to fit the human figure and Compresses it lightly.” The torture normally lasted “for 24 hours without food or drink” and was considered so atrocious by the freedmen that they claimed they would “prefer a severe whipping.” The act of physically confining freedmen to the sweatbox was reminiscent of slaveholder attempts to control black bodies with totalitarian proficiency, but it took on added meaning after emancipation. Whereas black families in St. Bernard Parish eagerly embraced the possibilities of an education for their children at the freedmen’s schools, the violent actions of local planters made it unequivocally clear that they would continue to use force to dictate the lives of free black people, much as they had the enslaved.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> In many places, the violent campaigns that white terrorists waged against the government schools during Reconstruction were replaced by general indifference and apathy after the removal of Union support from the South. In Kentucky, the state legislature refused to fund black public schools until 1874, and it was another six years before they were legally funded on the same terms as white schools. Even then, the notion that both school systems received equal appropriations remained a farce. See Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891* (Frankfort: The Kentucky Historical Society, 1992), 267.

<sup>59</sup> E.W. Wheelock to Thomas W. Conway, February 14, 1865, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1026, reel no, 1.

In this sense, Stiner's words were extremely revealing: the freedmen would rather be whipped, the type of violence most often associated with slavery during Reconstruction, than submit to an even more malicious form of torture that white Southerners employed to terrify blacks who dared believe they had the right to attend the government school. Wheelock was unsure if there was more than one of these devices in St. Bernard Parish, but he had heard that the planters conspired to send individuals from other places to Morgan's plantation for "the purpose."<sup>60</sup>

Several years later, Julia Higgins, a teacher at a freedmen's school in Fisher's Landing, Louisiana, wrote to headquarters in New Orleans to relate the difficulties she was experiencing with violent whites. "Please excuse me for troubling you so often," Higgins began, "but I have had a great deal of trouble in keeping up my school." Since the time of her last report, Higgins claimed that local whites had recommenced their earlier efforts to drive her from the area, and this time they "attempted by force to break up the school." Beyond this, the terrorists had also "threatened to shoot any children" that defied their demands and attended the school. Black parents were somewhat "reluctant" to send their children to school under the circumstances, Higgins concluded, but after several days most of the students had returned. Although they had not been bothered for several days, she feared that local whites were quietly plotting the next step in their nefarious "designs."<sup>61</sup>

In other cases, freedmen's teachers seemed to have rationalized the violence they and their students experienced by accepting that some level of violence was normal given their position. In December 1865, John B. McElroy concluded the yearly report from the

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Julia Higgins to Captain Pierce, March 7, 1867, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 6.



Magnolia School in Plaquemines Parish by rather blithely noting that the school had suffered a great deal of indignity during the year. In McElroy's words: "Sir, I have to Report that the overseer on this place has done his best to kill me."<sup>62</sup> It was a shocking way to end his last communication of the year—and yet in the violent atmosphere that gripped the South during the early days of Reconstruction, it seemed almost hauntingly fatalistic, a realization that help would only come his way if the overseer proved successful in his efforts.

The remnants of particularly violent episodes could also have drastic consequences for local students. In September 1868, a massacre of African Americans and white Unionists in Opelousas, a small town in St. Landry Parish, Louisiana, engendered a great deal of animosity and violence against the freedmen's schools in the area. At the end of October, the District Superintendent's Monthly Report for St. Landry Parish simply noted that schools in Opelousas had not been in operation the entire month. The reason for such a state of affairs was "the fact of the schools having been entirely broken up, as one of the results of the late riot." Tensions were high, and it had been extremely "difficult to secure the attendance of any scholars since the riot." Despite these extenuating circumstances, the report concluded that it was likely that the government schools could be reopened in the near future once the furor from the upcoming election had passed and the planters were able to bring in their crops for the season.<sup>63</sup> By the following summer, however, a regiment of Union troops that had been sent to provide a semblance of order to St. Landry Parish reported that the region was still

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<sup>62</sup> John B. McElroy, "Semi-Monthly Report of Magnolia School, Parish of Plaquemines," December 26, 1865, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 4.

<sup>63</sup> "District Superintendent's Monthly School Report," St. Landry Parish, October 31, 1868, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 4.

largely lawless and at the mercy of the “Rebel” faction. At the heart of the problem was the “total inability of the civil government of this Parish to exercise its functions, or to afford any protection to its Citizens.”<sup>64</sup> In such an environment, it was hardly an exaggeration to say that parents and students risked their lives to attend the government schools.

And yet, despite the persistence of threats made against schools, students, and teachers, and the willingness of some terrorists to act on these verbal intimidations, white Southerners found it remarkably difficult to use personal violence effectively to curtail the development of African American education. This can be traced, in large part, to the freedmen’s desire to become educated, and the fact that they were willing to make sacrifices and suffer serious hardships in order to achieve their goals.<sup>65</sup> This realization, however, can also be explained in logistical terms: one can use violence to stop a student or teacher from going to one school, but it is nearly impossible to physically destroy a people’s will to learn. American slaveholders, after all, had tried for over two centuries—and as soon as the enslaved had achieved their emancipation, they demanded an education as loudly and forcefully as they could.

In this sense, educational violence was different from attacks that occurred in the workplace or were directed against black households. An employer might whip a worker and refuse to pay them, or a group of white men might forcibly remove a black man from his home and drive his family from their land, and in both cases the violence employed

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<sup>64</sup> Frank M. Cone to George Baldey, May 24, 1869, in United States Army Twenty-Fifth Colored Infantry Regiment Letterbook, 1869.

<sup>65</sup> Mary Niall Mitchell, *Raising Freedom’s Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future after Slavery* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Span, *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse*; Williams, *Self-Taught*; Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*.

accomplished both the immediate and long-term objectives discussed in previous chapters. Physically assaulting or terrorizing a student might prevent a child from going to school for a few days or weeks, but it left the larger educational structure intact and operational. Bent as they were on the general suppression of black education, white Southerners would look to new forms of savagery and terror.

Ultimately, the destruction of school property proved far more effective at limiting black educational opportunities than physical violence directed at individual persons. Schoolhouses, desks, books, slate boards, and other school material provided white terrorists with tangible targets that could be identified and destroyed. In the postbellum South, moreover, such resources were particularly scarce and difficult for the Bureau, and individual teachers, to obtain. Bureau records are littered with requests for these materials that were necessary in order to operate the government schools, and most field agents and teachers concluded that it would have been impossible to run the schools without the tuition paid by the freedmen themselves.<sup>66</sup> The effort required to save and sacrifice in order to buy tuition tickets once was herculean, and it would have been even more draining to pay yet again for something that had been ripped from one's grasp by hatred and force.

Even then, the lack of school supplies was not something that could be overcome by sheer will and perseverance. Without the mundane assets that were largely monopolized by whites in the postwar South, the freedmen's schools simply could not function. Here was the generalized suppression of African American education that whites desired, and they could accomplish it all the while avoiding the confrontation with

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<sup>66</sup> See M. Wighter to Captain H.R. Pease, "Reports Sale of Tuition Tickets," February 2, 1866, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 12.

federal force that often came with assaulting or harming government officials. In the end, it would have been impossible to prevent every black child from attending a particular school—but burning down the schoolhouse, or throwing textbooks and readers into the Mississippi River, could mean the disruption of the school for weeks and months, and possibly forever.

The most visceral form of property destruction in the postbellum South was the burning of black schoolhouses. If damaged desks or books could sometimes be salvaged, the complete annihilation of a structure and its contents could permanently interrupt black educational efforts in a given location. In certain instances, the fiery demolition of a black school might also be highly symbolic, as fire represented the demonic and hellish qualities of racial violence that regulator groups like the Klan utilized to further terrorize African Americans.<sup>67</sup> In March 1871, a group of black citizens that gathered in Frankfort, Kentucky, described the wholesale terror that resulted from the burning of black schoolhouses in central Kentucky. According to the delegation, a schoolhouse had been burned on Christmas Eve 1867 in Breckinridge County and a “colored school exhibition” at Midway had been attacked by a white mob the following July. In September 1869, a “colored meeting-house” that African Americans had repurposed in Carroll County had been burned, and a “Negro school-house” had been torched by incendiaries in Christian County during May 1870. The next month, yet another “Colored school-house on Glen Creek, in Woodford County,” had been burned down by

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<sup>67</sup> Elaine Frantz Parsons, *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan During Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 84. “The idea of posing as a denizen of hell to frighten freedmen seems indeed to have predated the formation of the Ku-Klux. The *Pulaski Citizen* reported in early 1866 that a huge, monstrous, fire-breathing creature with cloven hooves and horns had visited four freedmen’s households in Bracken County, Kentucky.”

local bandits as part of the campaign to deprive African Americans of “life, liberty, and property” in the Commonwealth. Finally, in early January 1871, white incendiaries had set fire to both a church and a school in Scott County, rendering it uninhabitable for educational purposes.<sup>68</sup>

The New Orleans *Tribune* noted during September 1866 that the spirit of terror manifest in Kentucky had taken hold across the entire postbellum South. According to the *Tribune*, “the aim of this treachery is to put the steadfast loyalists of the South under the feet of the ‘whipped but not subdued’ Rebels, and to enable the latter to glut their vengeance on the former.” The “vengeance” that the *Tribune* described resulted from the return to political power of the “soldiers of Lee, Beauregard, Johnston, and Hood” who had “supplanted nearly all others as policeman of Southern cities; they are organized and officered as State militia; and they ruthlessly crush every demonstration of loyal Whites or loyal Blacks in assertion of the EQUAL RIGHTS OF AMERICAN FREEMEN.” Writing in the aftermath of the New Orleans massacre in the summer of 1866, the *Tribune* reminded its readers that such extraordinary violence should not be considered anomalous in post-Civil War Louisiana. “The recent wholesale massacres at Memphis and New Orleans,” the editors thundered, “were but conspicuous manifestations of the spirit now rampant in the South, whereof the pro-Rebel triumph in Kentucky is a more recent example.”<sup>69</sup> The real consequences of this Southern malevolence were found in everyday life. “The school-houses of the blacks are burned,” the *Tribune* concluded, “and their White teachers subjected to violence and outrage by unchanged Rebels, who

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<sup>68</sup> U.S. Senate, *Memorial of a Committee Appointed at a Meeting of Colored Citizens of Frankfort, Kentucky*.

<sup>69</sup> This was the same election mentioned previously in this chapter. See Marshall, ““The Rebel Spirit in Kentucky,”” in Cimbala and Miller, eds., *The Great Task Remaining Before Us*, 60-62.

relieve [*sic*] the work of murder and arson by cheers for Andy Johnson and execrations of Congress.” Although the Civil War was officially over and emancipation a reality, the struggle continued.<sup>70</sup>

While arson represented the scorched-earth policy of white terrorists, more mundane forms of property destruction proliferated as well. Across the postbellum South, it was common practice to attack schoolhouses during the night or when the local teacher or agent were absent. Upon arriving at his post at School No. 6 in Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana, in August 1865, Joseph F. Moorly reported that the “Public Property is much damaged and scattered about the neighborhood.” According to Moorly, the schoolhouse had been claimed by a local plantation owner who had used the building to house a black family who he employed. After discussing the matter with the family living in the building, Moorly managed to obtain one room that he would use for the school, but he still lacked basic material necessities that had been dispersed throughout the area by local citizens. Apparently, the schoolhouse did not have a lock, and “the table has been broken up, as well as many of the Benches.”<sup>71</sup>

Frances McDonald, the teacher at School No. 5 in St. John the Baptist Parish, informed E.W. Wheelock in June of the same year that she had been threatened with violence repeatedly upon her arrival at the school, and, furthermore, “three attempts to enter her [school]room at night have been made within ten days.” With McDonald’s safety, and the school’s existence, at stake, Wheelock ordered a local Bureau official to

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<sup>70</sup> New Orleans *Tribune*, September 15, 1866.

<sup>71</sup> Joseph F. Moorly to Lieutenant E.W. Wheelock, August 20, 1865, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 2.

“give your immediate attention to this matter! employ[sic] every means to find out an punish the offenders, and secure Miss McDonald against farther insult.”<sup>72</sup>

Little had changed by late February 1868. In a report submitted from the 1<sup>st</sup> Sub-District of Louisiana, Bureau official R. Folles complained that the local white population exhibited a “great deal of prejudice” towards educating the freedmen. According to Folles, it was extremely common for children to be insulted and verbally abused as they walked to and from school along “public streets,” and recently a few whites had gravely vandalized and destroyed government property. A wide assortment of “School property,” Folles concluded, had been “stolen and thrown in the river by some unknown ruffian.”<sup>73</sup> Folles’ report, of course, was simply another event in a long line of travesties confronting black schools. In November 1865, Emerson Bentley, principal of the No. 14 School in Assumption Parish, conveyed news of a similar assault against school property. On the night of November 19 “the schoolhouse was entered, the desk broken open and all of the Copy Books, a few Reading books and a slate were taken out and thrown into a ditch of muddy water near the schoolhouse and consequently are unfit for use.” It had been two weeks since the incident, and Bentley communicated that classes had yet to resume: “The Writing classes cannot proceed until a new supply of Books, pencils and crayons are received...but nothing has yet been received.”<sup>74</sup> It was unclear how much longer the

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<sup>72</sup> E.W. Wheelock to M. C. Kerressey, June 2, n.d., in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 1. The document contained in the Freedmen’s Bureau records is a “press copy” of the original letter. On the copy, the only dates that are visible are the month and day. Based on where the file is located within the archive, it is fairly apparent that it was produced in 1865.

<sup>73</sup> R. Folles, “Monthly Report of Sub-Assistant Commissioner (or Agent),” February 29, 1868, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 3.

<sup>74</sup> Emerson Bentley, “Semi-Monthly Report of No. 14 School, Parish of Assumption,” November 30, 1865, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 3.

school would be out of commission, but in the meantime Bentley and his scholars could do little but wait for the Bureau to requisition and forward them the necessary materials.

Perhaps more than anything else, it was the resignation in Bentley's voice that shone through most clearly. The assault on the small government school in Assumption Parish had hardly been extraordinary, and it was extremely unlikely that this particular outrage would gain traction outside of the government circles in which thousands of similar tales traveled. It was the kind of violence, quite honestly, that occurred just below the level of public consciousness—it was mundane and, in comparison to the bloodbath that passed for normal in the postbellum South, it was even a bit routine. Indeed, in the litany of offenses that should justifiably be laid at the white South's feet for their actions during Reconstruction, the charge of tossing school books into a wet, muddy ditch would hardly turn anyone's head. And yet, this one, simple action had completely halted school operations for nearly a month, and there was no end in sight. The story was the same across the state, and across the region, as terror and violence were arrayed against black students, teachers, and schoolhouses to effectively stifle African American education in countless settings. It was the monotony of this violence that made it so effective—and so difficult to overcome. The pressure was suffocating, and African American schools were finding it harder and harder to breathe.

In early September 1866, the New Orleans *Tribune* took it upon itself to set the record straight regarding black education in Louisiana. Despite optimistic claims made by the Freedmen's Bureau that hundreds of schools had been formed and staffed by over 250 teachers that were "employed in the noble work of diffusing light among these



people [the freedmen],” conditions had worsened in recent months. First, the Bureau had “withdrawn its [monetary] support” from the schools, and, as a result, the freedmen were forced to pay tuition fees—that many could not afford—in order to keep the system operational. More important than this, however, was the violent opposition of white Louisianans to the proposition of African American education. The white “citizens have opposed by all means in their power the continuance of the great work of education in the country parishes,” the *Tribune* claimed. “They have refused to rent buildings for school purposes, and to board the teachers; they have whipped Mr. LeBlanc at Point Coupée; dangerously stabbed in the back Mr. Burnham at Monroe; and beaten almost to death Mr. Ruby, at Jackson. The record of the teachers of the first colored schools in Louisiana,” the editorial concluded, “will be one of honor and blood.” Under these trying circumstances, it was little wonder that there were few schools in rural portions of the state, and even in the cities they were “not numerous.” Although the school system was “crippled for a time,” the *Tribune* exhorted its readers to provide funds to educate the freedmen who could not pay for it themselves. So “long as we do not enjoy our share in the school fund of the State, or so long as children are not admitted in all public schools irrespective of the color of their skin...[we are] to make up, by all means, the short comings of the governing class of the day.”<sup>75</sup>

Affairs in Kentucky were alarmingly similar. In a lengthy account penned by “Veteran,” an “Occasional Correspondent” for the *New York Times* stationed in Louisville, in early December 1868, the anonymous writer blasted the Democratic Louisville *Courier-Journal* for its assertion that black Kentuckians were not subjected to

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<sup>75</sup> New Orleans *Tribune*, September 5, 1866.

repeated outrages and violence in the Bluegrass State.<sup>76</sup> “Unprejudiced men who have traveled through the State and taken pains to ascertain the facts,” he proclaimed, “know that the condition of the freedmen...is most deplorable. And it is no fault of the freedmen themselves.” The responsibility for this reprehensible state of affairs, rather, should be shouldered by the white Kentuckians who refused to acknowledge that African Americans had any rights that must be respected. “The opposition to them [the freedmen] and to their higher interests has been and is assuming organized shape in many parts of the State, and bands of wicked and lawless men...are almost daily committing outrages and depredations which disgrace the name of Kentucky, but which are passed over in silence by the civil authorities.” The freedmen were targeted, Veteran continued, for “no other crime than accepting the gift of freedom from the Government, [and] are subjected to torture and persecution unparalleled in the annals of barbarism.” Although the freedmen had done much more in securing their own freedom than Veteran admitted, he was undoubtedly correct that whites resented any tangible proof of black autonomy and advancement, chief among them the establishment of black schools. “Such a thing as a school for their benefit would not be countenanced for a moment,” Veteran concluded, “but would subject the person proposing it to a coat of tar and feathers, and perhaps to much more violent treatment.”<sup>77</sup>

Beyond this potential violence, Veteran went on to describe horrific scenes in which the freedmen were assaulted and terrorized on a nightly basis. “Almost every breeze comes laden with the wail of freedmen,” he proclaimed. For white Southerners,

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<sup>76</sup> According to the *Courier-Journal*, “there is, in *no part* of Kentucky, such a state of things as he alleges to exist.” The newspaper was responding to a report of General George H. Thomas in which Thomas described the outrages and violence that black Kentuckians dealt with on a daily basis.

<sup>77</sup> *New York Times*, December 4, 1868.

however, “who have been accustomed to the atrocities of the institution of slavery, and have been in the habit of considering black men entitled to no rights other than mere existence,” these offenses were seen as nothing but the “merest trifles.” As many other observers had noted, this wave of violence included a great deal of aggression directed against black educational efforts: “Almost every night is lit up with the blaze of burning churches and school-houses.” “In one county alone, in the month of October,” Veteran continued, “four public buildings of freedmen were burned—two churches and two school-houses.” Although he offered few specifics, Veteran portrayed an environment in which brazen terror was the order of the day and white Southerners ran amok with little worry that they would ever be prosecuted for their heinous crimes. “Almost every day we hear of teachers of freedmen’s schools driven from their fields of labor by threats or violent demonstrations which they dare not defy. These and other crimes are of almost daily occurrence,” and yet white Kentuckians and unrepentant Rebels continued to deny that any reign of terror existed in the Commonwealth. “Indeed,” Veteran concluded, “I think I may justly charge the Courts and officers of this State, as *particeps criminis* in these violations of law and decency....I consider them equally guilty with the masked villains who perpetrate these crimes.”<sup>78</sup>

The crushing weight of this pervasive violence was easily detectable. In the aftermath of the Civil War, black Southerners looked to the prospect of education as a means whereby individuals and communities could elevate themselves and improve their material condition—and their efforts were repaid with brutality. Although schools in the Southern countryside were at greater risk at being terrorized by vengeful whites than their

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

urban counterparts, the reality was that it was nearly impossible for black schools to avoid violence no matter where they were located. The vignettes of Douglass Wilson and Edmonia Highgate that open this chapter speak to the prevalence of urban school place attacks, and many other black Southerners and government officials noted that schoolhouses could not be secured without adequate military force. In late 1865, for instance, J.S. Chapman wrote to Bureau headquarters in New Orleans and testified that schools around Baton Rouge had been established, and others could as well, providing that the army remained a viable presence in the area. “If the military is removed,” Chapman wrote in a rather understated manner, “it will be hard to establish schools here.”<sup>79</sup> Earlier the same year, three members of the Karches family were arrested by “Citizen Newcomb” along the Gentilly Road for assault with a deadly weapon, and Solomon Doty charged Bernard Karches “with maliciously breaking down the School house for col’d children” in New Orleans.<sup>80</sup> As debilitating as singular assaults undoubtedly could be, it was the collective toll of these nearly incessant attacks on African American schools that black Southerners noted most frequently. As was the case in so many other settings in the postbellum South, the process of education became a violent grind.

Day after day, this relentless assault that white Southerners perpetrated against African American schools proved debilitating to the administrators, teachers, parents, and students that confronted this daunting wave of terror. On January 30, 1871, Thomas W. Conway, then Superintendent of Public Education for the state of Louisiana, submitted

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<sup>79</sup> J.S. Chapman to Captain H.R. Pease, October 5, 1865, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 3.

<sup>80</sup> Louis Hoogler, “Notice of Arrest of Karches Family,” June 29, 1865, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1026, reel no. 2.

his report for the previous calendar year and complained that there “is probably no other State in the Union where the work of popular education, by a system of free schools, is conducted under the disadvantages which are encountered in Louisiana.” Chief among Conway’s complaints was the state’s constitutional directive “which forbids the establishing of public schools from which any child shall be rejected on account of race, color, or previous condition.” Although Conway agreed that integrated schools were desirable, any discussion of ending segregation aroused “determined opposition” among white Louisianans. This resistance was so pervasive, Conway continued, that he had difficulty finding school directors due to the “apprehension of persecution, and even social ostracism, on the part of the opponents of the law.” Furthermore, Conway argued that it would be “irrational” to overlook the “active antagonism of so large a portion of the white population of the State,” as it was a “formidable hinderance [*sic*] to our school-work.” What had been done to educate the freedman, Conway concluded, should have been considered nothing short of miraculous. It was work, after all, which had been “accomplished...in the face of difficulties nowhere else experienced, and, at many points, in defiance of a sleepless opposition.”<sup>81</sup>

If Conway’s problems were unique in their specifics, those involved in African American education nonetheless confronted similar difficulties across the South. In Kentucky, the state Superintendent of Education concluded in 1870 that no “satisfactory plan has yet been established by the legislature for the education of the colored population,” despite the fact that black Kentuckians “have always manifested an eager and earnest desire for the education of their children.” Furthermore, the taxes that

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<sup>81</sup> U.S. House, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Education, 1871*, H.Ex.Doc.1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1871) *Serial Set* 1506.

African Americans paid for the purposes of establishing a school system were being misappropriated by state and local officials: “The law which merely provides that colored schools *may* be taught is generally ignored, and money collected of colored people for school purposes applied to the support of paupers.”<sup>82</sup>

In July 1869, at the Kentucky State Educational Convention, African Americans from across the Commonwealth protested this state of affairs and declared that it was time for Kentuckians to realize that “old things are done away...[and that] slavery is dead.” Furthermore, the Convention demanded “equal taxation and equal education for the colored youth of our State.” What progress had been made so far had been done with no assistance from the state, and, instead, the delegates thanked Northern aid societies such as the American Missionary Association and the Western Freedmen’s Aid Commission for their charity and generosity.<sup>83</sup> Arrayed against the violent opposition of white Kentuckians, however, such private contributions were deemed wholly inadequate to support anything resembling a uniform educational system for the freedmen. The violent, so it seemed, had stolen the fruits of freedom.

None of this, of course, would have come as a surprise to Douglass Wilson, Edmonia Highgate, or the thousands of other African Americans that lived through the brutal summer of 1866 in New Orleans. In January 1867, the U.S. Senate’s Committee on Military Affairs and the Militia published a series of reports from assistant commissioners of the Freedmen’s Bureau that detailed the progress made in establishing black schools the previous year in Louisiana. It was grim reading. “During the months

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<sup>82</sup> U.S. House, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Education, 1870*, H.Ex.Doc.1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1870), *Serial Set* 1450.

<sup>83</sup> *New York Times*, July 17, 1869.

of February, March, and April,” the report began, “the hostility to colored schools was so great that many acts of personal violence and insult were committed on the teachers, school-houses were burned, and pupils were beaten and frightened.” Although it barely seemed possible, conditions worsened as the year progressed. “As the military force began to be withdrawn from the smaller places in the country, schools had to be discontinued for want of protection.” With the Union reducing its presence in many areas of the South, the freedmen’s schools were left at the mercy of civil officials who barely deigned to lift a finger in the defense of local African Americans. The “civil authorities would do little or nothing to protect the freed people in the enjoyment of their rights, or punish the perpetrators of outrage where the injured party was a negro.” This “state of things,” the account concluded rather sardonically, “made it look exceedingly gloomy for the state of colored schools in Louisiana.”<sup>84</sup>

While prospects improved during the early summer of 1866 with the decision to pay the \$80,000 debt that the government schools had accumulated from other federal resources, the “New Orleans massacre” in July “renewed the former hostile feeling, especially in the larger towns, and many outrages were perpetrated.” In the month following the massacre at the Mechanics’ Institute, New Orleans appeared little better than a war zone. During “the month of August, four colored churches, also used for school purposes, were burned, and attempts made to fire several other buildings used as school-houses.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> U.S. Senate, Committee on Military Affairs and the Militia, *Reports of Assistant Commissioners of Freedmen, and Synopsis of Laws on Persons of Color in Late Slave States*, S.Ex.Doc.6 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1867), *Serial Set* 1276.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

For the African American community, these losses were catastrophic, and the educational system that was constantly on the brink of collapse seemed ready to totally disintegrate. “One church nearly finished, at a cost of about \$1,000,” the report continued, “was completely demolished in one night, because a colored school was to have opened in it the next week.” The outcome of this reign of terror would have been fairly easy to predict. “Through fear the children dared not attend [school], and thus many schools which were about to be opened had to be given up.”<sup>86</sup> Even then, black parents like Douglass Wilson continued to send their children to schools throughout the city, firm in the belief that an education would provide the means through which the next generation of African Americans might achieve a more prosperous and equitable future. When students returned home at the end of the day “bruised, stabbed, beaten half to death, and some times quite dead,” it was a jarring reminder that white Southerners would resort to shocking levels of barbarism and terror in their bid to extinguish black hopes of a better tomorrow.<sup>87</sup> In the face of such violence, black Southerners refused to surrender or to lose hope. As audacious and difficult as it was to achieve, they demanded that the schoolhouse door remain open.

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 279; Smith, *We Ask Only for Even-Handed Justice*, 98.



## Chapter 5 – “We want a white man’s State...and we intend to have it...”: The Everyday Violence of Voting

On August 7, 1871, the city of Frankfort, Kentucky, witnessed a violent election day that many white Kentuckians had been predicting for years.<sup>1</sup> Convinced that the formerly enslaved could never occupy a legitimate part of the state body politic, white Kentuckians insisted throughout the early years of Reconstruction that black participation in public life would inevitably lead to a war between the races. When that war came, white Kentuckians assured themselves, they would not be found wanting. In October 1868, the *Kentucky Sentinel* gleefully reprinted a letter sent to the *New York Tribune* that explained a confrontation between blacks and whites in Georgia in near Biblical terms and outlined the stakes of biracial politics: “You think it strange that so many negroes were killed and so few whites injured,” the letter began. “To me this is not strange. The negroes were slaughtered, as they will always be, under such circumstances.”<sup>2</sup> Just under three years later, as groups of white and black men squared off across the streets of Frankfort, a peaceful election day turned into a murderous affair. After an initial exchange of gunshots that ended with the death of two white men, the local militia restored order until the early morning hours of August 8, when white mobs descended on the city and lynched two black men in response.<sup>3</sup> The “Frankfort Riot,” as the

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the slow pace of political change in the Commonwealth in relation to the ex-Confederate states, the August 1871 election was the first statewide contest in which black men were able to vote. For the comparison’s sake, African American males had been enfranchised in Louisiana in early 1868.

<sup>2</sup> *Kentucky Sentinel*, October 29, 1868.

<sup>3</sup> For several different accounts of the riot, see Frankfort *Commonwealth*, August 11, 1871; Lexington *Observer & Reporter*, August 9, 1871; Louisville *Commercial*, August 9, 1871.

confrontation between black and white Kentuckians that day would become known as, symbolized for many Kentuckians both the potential, and the danger, of Reconstruction politics. The revolutionary possibilities of the era, it was apparent, would be confronted by a white reactionary movement bent on enforcing white supremacy—peacefully if it could, with terror if it must.<sup>4</sup>

In many ways, the 1871 Frankfort Riot presents in a microcosm the confluence of racial violence and electoral politics in the Commonwealth during the era of Reconstruction.<sup>5</sup> Although conflicting reports make it difficult to ascertain the precise origins of the violent affair, both the Democratic and the Republican press generally agreed that election day, August 7, had proceeded smoothly until the close of polls around four o'clock in the evening. According to the Republican *Frankfort Commonwealth*, around this time there was “some excitement at the Market House precinct, caused by several drunken men shouting and cursing, and occasionally waving their hats. Later in the evening several pistols were displayed.” The crowd, composed of both blacks and whites, probably numbered several hundred. “Several blacks,” the *Commonwealth* continued, “also seemed under the influence of liquor, and at times were

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<sup>4</sup> The reference to Reconstruction as a “revolutionary” movement comes from the work of Eric Foner. See Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> A number of scholars who have studied the race “riots” of Reconstruction in recent years have properly identified these events as “massacres” in order to place the onus for such violence on the murderous white supremacists rather than largely peaceful African Americans. See James G. Hollandsworth, Jr., *An Absolute Massacre: The New Orleans Race Riot of July 30, 1866* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004); Stephen V. Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis: The Race Riot that Shook the Nation One Year after the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013); LeeAnna Keith, *The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror, and the Death of Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). The violence in Frankfort in August 1871, although it resulted in four deaths, did not approach the widespread, indiscriminate slaughter and destruction of these other massacres. Given the conclusion of the riot, one historian of racial violence in Kentucky has described the events as the “most publicized lynchings in Kentucky during Reconstruction.” See George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and “Legal Lynchings”* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 49-51.

shouting and talking loudly.”<sup>6</sup> After both sides had squared off across Broadway and exchanged verbal jabs and tossed rocks, shots erupted from the crowd. While the Republican press was hesitant to assign blame for the initial shots, the Democratic *Lexington Observer & Reporter* was less reserved. With no “provocation from the whites,” the *Observer & Reporter* charged, “firing was began by the negroes upon the more thickly-crowded whites. A scene of great excitement ensued, the whites being apparently taken by surprise, and but few firing pistols in return while a heavy fire was delivered from the opposite side.”<sup>7</sup> Less convinced of the one-sided nature of the contest, the Frankfort *Commonwealth* reported that “firing seemed indiscriminate and wild, and was evidently participated in by both whites and blacks. The latter stampeded in a moment or two as did nearly everyone else on the ground.”<sup>8</sup>

If the origins of the election riot were disputed, the results certainly were not. The indiscriminate firing by both sides had left two white men, William Gilmore and Silas Bishop, dead, and one black man, Henry Washington, wounded. According to the Frankfort *Commonwealth*, the panic following the riot was near hysterical: “The company of Militia was ordered out, and patrolled the streets. A strong disposition was manifested to exterminate the negro population, but the advice of cooler heads and better counsel prevailed.” Washington, a local leader in black politics, was placed in the local jail, supposedly for his protection. By midnight, however, the majority of the local militia had begun to disperse in small groups so as to avoid the suspicion of the Mayor who had promised to protect Washington from violence. A little after midnight, the

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<sup>6</sup> Frankfort *Commonwealth*, August 11, 1871.

<sup>7</sup> Lexington *Observer & Reporter*, August 9, 1871.

<sup>8</sup> Frankfort *Commonwealth*, August 11, 1871.

militia captain informed the Mayor that most of the militia had departed surreptitiously: “Seeing that nearly all were gone, and the rest in the mood to disperse, [the Mayor] expressed his disbelief in the utility of their further service, and they were dismissed.”<sup>9</sup>

With the militia gone, local whites would obtain the retribution they desired. “The militia had been patrolling the city during the night for the purpose of preserving the peace,” reported the *Louisville Commercial*, “and it was almost immediately after they had retired from their beats that the mob collected, in a very quiet but apparently preconcerted manner, and carried their designs into execution.”<sup>10</sup> The *Frankfort Commonwealth*, rather bluntly, related their morbid “designs”: “the mob appeared at the jail, demanded and received the keys, took therefrom Henry Washington, wounded in the riot, and Henry Johnson, committed for rape upon Mrs. Pfeiffer, carried them over the river to South Frankfort, and hung them near Judge Drane’s residence.”<sup>11</sup> As on so many other occasions in the postbellum South, voting and violence had become inextricably linked.

Although politics was a broad and multi-faceted process, this chapter will focus on the act of voting because physically casting a ballot gave African Americans the most direct link to the democratic process. With enfranchisement, black Southerners the vote as a crucial instrument in creating an equitable, biracial republic. Throughout Reconstruction, tens of thousands of working class African Americans cast ballots in Kentucky and Louisiana, an accomplishment that announced that their political voice and

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Louisville Commercial*, August 9, 1871.

<sup>11</sup> *Frankfort Commonwealth*, August 11, 1871.

concerns would be a part of the political landscape in the postbellum South.<sup>12</sup> For their part, white Southerners completely rejected that blacks had any legitimate right to participate in the political sphere. Whites turned to widespread voter intimidation and harassment throughout election cycles and outright assault and murder at polling places on election days. Viewed in totality, this political violence aimed to remove blacks from the electorate and ensure that the South would be controlled by white votes.

If the outcome of the events in Frankfort on August 7—two men shot dead, another two murdered by lawless vigilantes—was horrifying, in the written annals of Reconstruction’s electoral violence such bloodshed was, sadly, merely a drop in the bucket. From Kentucky to Louisiana, and nearly everywhere in between, postbellum politics produced appalling levels of racial violence as white Southerners resorted to terrorism and legal chicanery in their attempts to remove African Americans from the body politic through overwhelming force.<sup>13</sup> Although massacres in cities and towns such as New Orleans, Colfax, Memphis, and Hamburg, among others, have generated the most

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<sup>12</sup> For a study of these efforts in the late nineteenth century, see R. Volney Riser, *Defying Disfranchisement: Black Voting Rights Activism in the Jim Crow South, 1890-1908* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> The historical literature on the political violence of Reconstruction is enormous. For a few works that have particularly influenced my thinking in this chapter, see George C. Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984); Foner, *Reconstruction*; Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Summers, *The Ordeal of the Reunion*; Douglas R. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America’s Most Progressive Era* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); Aaron Astor, *Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012); James Michael Rhyne, “Rehearsal for Redemption: The Politics of Post-Emancipation Violence in Kentucky” (PhD diss., University of Cincinnati, 2007); Ted Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism, and Race in Louisiana, 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984); Joe Gray Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed, 1863-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974); Justin A. Nystrom, *New Orleans after the Civil War: Race, Politics, and a New Birth of Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Nicholas Lemann, *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

historical scholarship, these four incidents were not as unique as the historical literature implies by analyzing them in isolation.<sup>14</sup> Like the creation of an African American educational system, widespread black participation in the political process represented something entirely new for white Southerners. In fact, black political progress was arguably the most frightening aspect of African American freedom because it provided the most direct means by which black people could seize power and assert it over white people. Already on edge and fearful of what role the federal government would play in reshaping Southern society, whites resorted to violence at any indication, however faint, that they were losing their ability to control and dominate local and state offices. Compounding matters was the fact that whites often invented threats to their political hegemony where none existed, reinforcing the belief that constant vigilance—and violence—was necessary in order to avert a racial apocalypse whereby blacks would be elevated above whites.

To this end, the Conservative and Democratic press played a malevolent role in stoking the fires of racial terror. While much of daily life in the postbellum South occurred outside of public scrutiny, there was an immediacy and an urgency to political change that placed it at the forefront of civic conversation. The *Louisville Daily Democrat*, in an August 1867 editorial, evinced the feelings of many white Kentuckians: “He [an African American] is, as a general rule, almost a universal rule, ignorant and uninformed. He is incapable of giving an intelligent vote.”<sup>15</sup> A year later, the *Lexington Observer & Reporter* asserted in an even more unequivocal tone that “Kentucky has

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<sup>14</sup> Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed*, 167; Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 14.

<sup>15</sup> *Louisville Daily Democrat*, August 9, 1867.

learnt wisdom from this experiment with the African.” “She will do all in her power to prevent this race from exercising any power whatever in this State.” “We want a white man’s State...and we intend to have it.”<sup>16</sup> The emotionalism with which white Southerners discussed the potential degradation of their region’s political future due to the threats of “Radicalism,” and “Africanism” added to the urgency of these electoral contests. And, make no mistake, white Southerners viewed political confrontations as potential battles where votes and violence mingled, and whoever was left standing last would be declared the winner.

“The emancipated African already amongst us,” the Democratic New Orleans *Daily Crescent* declared in an October 1866 editorial that called for more white immigration to the South, “we cannot control, either for the good of society at large or for his own benefit. He is the ward of the general government, the pet of philanthropy and the subject of the freedmen’s bureau.” Eschewing the notion that black Southerners were capable of governing, the editors concluded that they were pawns used by white Republicans to desecrate the defeated South:

We do not think that they [the freedmen] are either competent to govern the country, or that they are proper instruments to be used in holding us in subjection to the will of a dominant faction. But they have been employed in the latter capacity, and a controlling faction is urging that they shall virtually control the government of the country.<sup>17</sup>

Returning the favor, the Republican press characterized the political options available to loyal men with Biblical allusions. Commenting on a black political meeting in Lexington, Kentucky, during March 1870, the Cincinnati *Commercial* claimed that white men had been nominated for most offices because the assembly feared driving whites out

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<sup>16</sup> Lexington *Observer & Reporter*, August 4, 1868.

<sup>17</sup> New Orleans *Daily Crescent*, October 19, 1866.

of the party. “I know that the argument is that they can’t be driven away,” the editorial mused, “as they have nowhere to go but to the Democracy or the devil, and that they will not go to either place, but instead thereof, will gulp down the nigger, no matter how unpalatable.”<sup>18</sup>

With the stakes of the contest so measured, both black and white Southerners viewed the political confrontations of Reconstruction, in many ways, as an extension of the Civil War.<sup>19</sup> That the Union Army remained highly visible through the presence of the Freedmen’s Bureau only added to the belief that the revolutionary changes wrought by the failed attempt at Southern independence were supported largely by military might, and white Southerners eagerly embraced racial violence and terrorism as a counterrevolutionary force that might roll back any advances that the freedmen had made.<sup>20</sup> Thus, electoral violence became an integral part of white efforts to create and enforce the dictates of white supremacy, whereby only those deemed worthy—and this was exclusively defined by the color of one’s skin—could legitimately participate in Southern political life. While electoral violence served to intimidate and harass black Southerners, it was also a clarion call for whites to remain vigilant and maintain the South’s racial divisions. As the Louisiana Democratic Convention resolved in October 1868, it was “the duty of all men, worthy of their Caucasian origin, to refuse positively to recognize negroes and other usurpers in office; to abstain to do all acts which may be implied as given even a tacit acquiescence or recognition to the flagrant usurpation and

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<sup>18</sup> Carried in *Cynthiana News*, April 7, 1870.

<sup>19</sup> For a recent study that examines events in New Orleans during Reconstruction from the perspective of military history, see James K. Hogue, *Uncivil War: Five New Orleans Street Battles and the Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Rable, *But There Was No Peace*, 81-100; Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 265-313.



insupportable tyranny of which our State is a victim.” Nearly reaching the limits of self-righteousness, the Democrats did not equivocate in pledging “a ceaseless resistance...everywhere, and by all means...to the negro despotism attempted to be imposed upon us by the radical faction.”<sup>21</sup>

From this standpoint, electoral terror was decidedly different from the violence that black Southerners experienced in their work places, households, and schools. In these other settings, white supremacists resorted to racial violence in order to signify the subordinate position of black people in Southern life. It was understood and accepted, for instance, that African Americans would establish individual homes for themselves and their families. Whites deployed a great deal of terror in their efforts to shape where black homes would be built and limit the meaning of independence that the autonomous household implied, but this was aimed more at establishing racial control than obliterating all black houses. The situation was similar in the workplace, as white employers assaulted black workers to establish their own power and force dependence onto African American laborers. Electoral violence, on the other hand, aimed to destroy the very possibility of black political activity. With the stakes raised to such heights, political violence presaged white fantasies of racial extermination rather than punishment and correction. As callous as it sounds, whites needed black laborers—they did not need black voters.

The pace and tenor of political developments in Louisiana and Kentucky during Reconstruction were decidedly different. While the sustainability of the coalition that blacks and loyal whites formed in the Pelican State should not be overstated, portions of

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<sup>21</sup> New Orleans *Crescent*, October 3, 1868.

Louisiana came under Union control during the Civil War, slavery was abolished in 1864, black men were enfranchised by the state's 1868 constitution, and African Americans held hundreds of important state and national elected offices during Reconstruction. There remained vast differences between black political viability in many of the state's rural parishes when compared to New Orleans, but fundamental change was evident.<sup>22</sup>

Kentucky's pro-slavery Unionism, on the other hand, was slowly eroded by the drift of national policy during the war, and by late-1865 the Commonwealth's white citizens had become "belated Confederates." In addition to denying black Kentuckians the franchise until the early 1870s, white Kentuckians were able to quickly and solidly establish the dominance of the Democratic Party as the vast majority had not disqualified themselves from the state's voting rolls through acts of treason.<sup>23</sup> In August 1867, the *Kentucky Statesman* decried these latent Confederate tendencies by comparing them to a military invasion. "What Bragg failed to do in 1862, with his armies and banners," the newspaper cried, "the people of Kentucky, five years later have done; they have given the state over into the hands of those who are and have been the enemies of the Union."<sup>24</sup>

Beyond these broad contours of change, another fundamental difference between the Pelican State and the Commonwealth was obvious: political stability. For all the

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<sup>22</sup> For the works that have most influenced my interpretation of Reconstruction in Louisiana, see Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed*; Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction*; Ted Tunnell, *Edge of the Sword: The Ordeal of Carpetbagger Harvey Twitchell in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001); Summers, *Ordeal of the Reunion*; Nystrom, *New Orleans after the Civil War*.

<sup>23</sup> For the idea of "belated Confederates," see Astor, *Rebels on the Border*. For two earlier accounts of Reconstruction in the Commonwealth, see E. Merton Coulter, *The Civil War and Readjustment in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1926); Ross A. Webb, *Kentucky in the Reconstruction Era* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1979). On the general Southern drift of Kentucky after the Civil War, see Anne E. Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> *Kentucky Statesman*, August 9, 1867.

Radical, revolutionary changes that white Kentuckians denounced, the federal government generally allowed state officials a great deal of leniency when bringing Kentucky into line with federal policy. In Louisiana, chaos reigned. Despite the complexity of events, a simple outline should sufficiently demonstrate the level of disorder. At the conclusion of the Civil War, Governor James Madison Wells ordered statewide elections that produced a Democratic landslide and a legislature, emboldened by Andrew Johnson's lenient approach to Reconstruction, which passed the infamous Black Codes.<sup>25</sup> The New Orleans riot of 1866 and the Radical ascendancy in the fall of the same year, however, led to the first of the federal Reconstruction Acts which placed Louisiana in a military district with Texas and dictated that a new state government be established.

Subsequently, the Louisiana state constitution of 1868 enfranchised black men, among other things, and elevated the Republican Henry Clay Warmoth to office of governor. By 1872, however, factionalism had splintered both the Republicans and the Democrats so severely that the election of a new governor ended with dual state governments, each denouncing the other. It would take federal troops to finally restore order and establish the Republican William Pitt Kellogg as governor. The Republicans would be rescued once more by the Union army after the temporarily successful coup d'état known as the Battle of Liberty Place gave control of New Orleans to the Democratic White Leagues for several days in September 1874, but, after this,

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<sup>25</sup> For several works that examine Andrew Johnson's role in Reconstruction, see Hans L. Trefousse, *Impeachment of a President: Andrew Johnson, the Blacks, and Reconstruction* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975); Paul H. Bergeron, *Andrew Johnson's Civil War and Reconstruction* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2011); Mark Wahlgren Summers, *A Dangerous Stir: Fear, Paranoia, and the Making of Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

Republican legitimacy in Louisiana essentially dissipated. By 1876, white Louisianans realized that the violent overthrow of the last vestiges of Reconstruction would be tolerated by the Union, and they accordingly resorted to voter fraud and racial terrorism to accomplish this end.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the centrality of political disarray to electoral violence in Louisiana, perhaps the most important division between the Pelican State and Kentucky was the proportion of each state's black population. Although white Louisianans could not have known the exact numbers in 1868, the 1870 U.S. Census counted 364,210 "colored" citizens—as opposed to 362,065 "white" residents of the state. Population size does not correlate directly with the number of eligible voters, but it was obvious to former rebels that the state's majority African American population could play a fundamental role in shaping the political future of Louisiana. Furthermore, local organizations, like the Union League, provided black Louisianans with opportunities to build social ties and political communities that exercised considerable influence in certain areas of the state.<sup>27</sup> In Kentucky, on the other hand, black people composed roughly one-fifth of the state's population in 1870. According to the 1870 U.S. Census, there were 1,098,692 "white" Kentuckians, and 222,210 "colored" residents of the state.<sup>28</sup> A dominant numerical majority did not prevent whites in the Commonwealth from engaging in electoral terrorism, but it is also clear that political confrontations in Kentucky were not as

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<sup>26</sup> The simple narrative summary that I have provided here prioritizes and foregrounds reactionary white violence in the overthrow of the Reconstruction, but it should be noted that such violence was necessary because of widespread black political activism. For the two most complete studies of Reconstruction in Louisiana, see Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed*; Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction*. On the political factionalism within Louisiana's political parties, see Nystrom, *New Orleans after the Civil War*.

<sup>27</sup> Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 292-295.

<sup>28</sup> Total Population, 1870. Social Explorer, (based on data from U.S. Census Bureau; accessed February 2, 2017).

precariously balanced between competing parties. If whites in Louisiana resorted to pervasive electoral terrorism earlier and more often than white Kentuckians, therefore, it was largely because they felt they needed to in order to maintain white political control within the state.

The uneven pace of electoral developments in Kentucky and Louisiana did not preclude, or dictate, individual acts of political violence, of course, but it certainly had important chronological influences on how black people experienced such terrorism. Take the Frankfort Riot as an example. Kentucky was solidly a one-party state in the late 1860s, but black enfranchisement through the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in March 1870 led to the development of a two-party system virtually overnight. Although racial terror had been common since the days of the Civil War, such violence began to take on a newfound urgency as white Kentuckians looked to repress the potential influence of black voters on state politics.<sup>29</sup> The August 1871 gubernatorial election, which pitted the incumbent Democrat Preston H. Leslie against the Republican challenger John Marshall Harlan, thus offered the first statewide challenge to the entrenched Democrats. The Democrats would meet the challenge with force. When the final ballots were tallied, Leslie won by a count of 126,455-89,299, nearly 59% of the popular vote.<sup>30</sup> If the outcome by itself portended miserable electoral results for the biracial coalition the Republicans hoped to forge, events in Frankfort on election day

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<sup>29</sup> For an insightful analysis of how the enfranchisement of black men in Kentucky transformed the state's white militia, see Patrick Lewis, "The Democratic Partisan Militia and the Black Peril: The Kentucky Militia, Racial Violence, and the Fifteenth Amendment, 1870-73," in *Civil War History* Vol. 56, No. 2 (June, 2010), pp. 148.

<sup>30</sup> Harrison and Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky*, 246.

were an even starker reminder of the lengths white Kentuckians would go to in order to police the racial and political boundaries of their state.

In all of its horror, the August 1871 race riot in Frankfort displayed the stakes of biracial politics in Kentucky, but it also signified the changed circumstances that black enfranchisement had created. Despite widespread public pressure to remain at home, blacks in Frankfort had demonstrated their political presence by voting in large numbers.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Frankfort whites reiterated their commitment to a white body politic, supported by violence if it must. The very public display of black activism and manhood, evident in the drunken verbal sparring and the display of pistols, further infuriated a white populace on edge. To white Kentuckians, the specter of Black Republican rule had never been so close. When blacks in Frankfort dared to lift their hands against whites, white residents felt compelled to respond. They would demonstrate that only they had the legitimate right to exercise violence in the Commonwealth. Furthermore, whites in Frankfort operated secure in the knowledge that it was extremely unlikely that the Democratic state government would prosecute white offenders. That the militia dispersed at almost the same time that the mob congregated simply cannot be coincidental.<sup>32</sup> As the white mob broke into the jail and took their prisoners to the edge of town, they took part in a ritual of violence that was already quite common in Kentucky. Not only did their actions represent an attack on black political activism, they also signified their allegiance to a vigilant white community that would defend its interests at all costs. The white mob, in other words, acted out its rights as citizens at the

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<sup>31</sup> Lewis, "Democratic Partisan Militia," 161-162.

<sup>32</sup> Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, 49-51.

same time as it denied citizenship and legal equality to black men like Henry Washington.

By the early 1870s, Louisiana had already experienced a number of violent, high-profile clashes between Republicans and Democrats, some of which, like the New Orleans massacre of 1866, proved formative in shaping national policy regarding Reconstruction. Moreover, the 1868 state constitution provided for universal male suffrage, an eventuality that led directly to the openly terroristic campaigns of the Knights of the White Camelia and unaffiliated white Louisianans throughout Reconstruction. Beginning in May 1868, after black enfranchisement, hardly any black man with Radical proclivities, or anyone who refused to follow the political demands of area whites, was safe from electoral terrorism. These earlier forms of racial terror were later given formal structure in the mid-1870s by the White Leagues, but in reality they were drawing on years of experience rather than initiating new practices. While these paramilitary organizations were responsible for the “peaks” of violence that have drawn so much historical scrutiny, “it should be remembered that lesser incidents occurred daily; the pressure on Negroes was constant.”<sup>33</sup>

In spite of these noted differences between Kentucky and Louisiana, black Southerners’ experiences with electoral violence were fairly consistent. The most common form of electoral violence was the intimidation and harassment of potential voters. This could take a number of different shapes, as black Southerners reported that they were verbally threatened, physically assaulted, shot at, and driven from voting locations throughout Reconstruction. In a petition drafted in April 1871, black residents

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<sup>33</sup> Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed*, 167.

of Frankfort, Kentucky, claimed that “in many parts of the State our people have been driven from the polls, refused the right to vote; many have been slaughtered while attempting to vote.”<sup>34</sup>

While black Kentuckians and their Republican allies continued to report such violence, the Democratic press asserted that elections were uninterrupted, but that illegal voting by blacks and Radicals would be met by violence if it persisted. Reveling in the Democratic wins in Harrison County, Kentucky, after the August 1870 elections, the *Cynthiana News* gloated that at one precinct not a single vote had been cast for the Republicans by a white man. It strains credulity that such an outcome could have been engendered without at the least the threat of violent reprisal, but the *News* believed the result to be quite natural. “They propose to vote the white man’s Ticket, and with a white man’s party, and for a white man’s government,” the editorial commenced. “They favor White Supremacy and Repudiation, and they will vote no other ticket hereafter.” Staking out the racial boundaries of Kentucky politics, the *News* further asserted that “many illegal votes were cast by the darkies—that many of them used their illegal rights in an illegal manner, which to a law abiding Democracy is hard to choke down.” “We are in favor of passing this offense unnoticed this time,” the editor concluded, but he threatened that local blacks would not be so fortunate in the future.<sup>35</sup>

At the very least, the *News*’ exhortations that no blacks or loyal whites had been physically prevented from voting speaks to the general awareness of such practices, and gives credence to the claims made by black residents of Frankfort in the April 1871

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<sup>34</sup> U.S. Senate, *Memorial of a Committee Appointed at a Meeting of Colored Citizens of Frankfort, Kentucky, and Vicinity, Praying Enactment of Laws for Better Protection of Life*, S.Mis.Doc.49 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1871), *Serial Set* 1467.

<sup>35</sup> *Cynthiana News*, August 11, 1870.



petition that African Americans were “slaughtered” for pressing their claims to the ballot. According to these Kentuckians, it was widely understood that black men risked their lives when going to vote. The language that the editor of the *Cynthiana News* utilized was also important, and it further evinced the dichotomy that white Southerners perceived between their legitimate political rights and the “illegal” rights that black Kentuckians possessed. Yet again, such verbiage shifted the blame for any political violence onto the victims, as white terrorists cast themselves as “law abiding” citizens and the preservers of good government. Electoral violence, in other words, was necessary in order for white Southerners to prevent the destruction of the democratic process that had been bastardized by the mere presence of black voters. This attitude did not materialize in the Commonwealth after the Fifteenth Amendment enfranchised black males; rather, alarmed white Kentuckians had been predicting since the Civil War that emancipation would inevitably lead to the extension of civil rights to blacks and, ultimately, the subversion of the “white man’s government. Previewing the 1868 election season as an all-or-nothing proposition, the *Kentucky Sentinel* warned that the nation’s future hung in the balance. “The contest,” the *Sentinel* exclaimed, is now “whether we shall have a free government or a despotism, a white man’s government or one in which the negro is supreme.”<sup>36</sup>

The violent political rhetoric of Reconstruction, bombastic though it was, should not be dismissed as mere hyperbole. If the myriad confrontations never led to the racial extermination that more outlandish prognosticators foretold, whites were rarely hesitant to employ violence when they thought it necessary. If threats failed to keep blacks from

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<sup>36</sup> *Kentucky Sentinel*, August 6, 1868.

going to the polls, it was not uncommon for individuals to use deadly force. In August 1870, the first year in which black Kentuckians could legally vote, the Louisville *Commercial* recounted that there had been several violent disturbances in the western part of the Commonwealth. “At Cross-Roads precinct, in McCracken County,” the report began, “as about sixty colored voters in a body were nearing the place of voting, they were fired upon from ambush, and two of them killed and several wounded.” Here we can glimpse some of the communal aspects of black political activity, as the voters intended to vote as a group—both for their own safety and to demonstrate their political power.<sup>37</sup>

And yet, despite these precautions, electoral terrorism forced the group to retreat and likely return home without casting a single ballot. The *Commercial*, at least, had few doubts as to the ultimate effect of such violence: “The affair created a great deal of consternation, both among blacks and whites, but of course the Democrats had a good majority at that precinct.” Despite the paucity of similar stories at the time of publication, the *Commercial* hinted that widespread chicanery was expected, especially in the Jackson Purchase, the far western reaches of the state. “Very few colored votes were cast in the counties west of the Tennessee river,” the report ominously concluded, “at any of the county precincts.”<sup>38</sup>

That both the *Cynthiana News* and the Louisville *Commercial* discussed these results by precinct highlights some important truths about nineteenth century elections that had dire ramifications for black voters. First, voting during Reconstruction was

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<sup>37</sup> See Elsa Barkley Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” in *Public Culture*, 7: pp. 107-146; Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, passim.

<sup>38</sup> Louisville *Commercial*, August 13, 1870.

extremely public, both in the sense that there was no secret ballot and that men often congregated in large groups to participate in the various masculine rituals that had come to be associated with the political process.<sup>39</sup> For black Southerners, the lack of political privacy was not as devastating or terrorizing as the martial overtones that characterized the act of voting—or, more pointedly, keeping someone else from voting—but it could have consequences in other aspects of their lives. When black men went to the polls, they broadcast their political activity to an entire white community, putting them at risk for reprisal in the workplace, in their homes, or anywhere else for that matter.

Thus, the physical act of voting was often both liberating and terrifying, as it allowed black men to partake in rituals, and enter spaces, that had previously been denied to them—at the same time as it exposed them to potential physical violence. It was no accident, after all, that white Southerners targeted black individuals who exercised their political rights, with community leaders often singled-out for the worst treatment.<sup>40</sup> The communal nature of Southern politics was further intensified in rural areas, where whites could personally identify any black man that voted and single them out for intimidation

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<sup>39</sup> On the longer history of antebellum political violence and the importance of such conflicts in nineteenth century politics, see Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, & the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 239-240; Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 17-19; Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Carole Emberton, *Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South after the Civil War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013). On how economic and political shifts beginning in the 1820s led to a particularly violent epoch in America's political life between 1820 and 1890, see Ross Barrett, *Rendering Violence: Riots, Strikes, and Upheavals in Nineteenth-Century American Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 4-7. On nineteenth-century political violence and rioting, see Richard Bense, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Michael Feldberg, *The Turbulent Era: Riot & Disorder in Jacksonian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); David Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Mary Ryan, *Civic War: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>40</sup> Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 292-295.

and harassment. It was not particularly easy to prevent blacks from casting a single vote in a given precinct, but whites believed it was necessary to guarantee racial survival.

Even before the enfranchisement of black men, the African American press warned that existing political terrorism threatened the ability of loyalists to participate freely in state elections. In May 1867, the New Orleans *Tribune* optimistically noted that the state of Louisiana “was entering a new era” where both Republicans and Democrats could enjoy “free meetings and free speech” without the danger of attack from the other side. According to the editors, Louisianans must learn to respect political discourse as a safeguard against hostile, violent elections that desecrated the meaning of democratic government. “Free discussion is the first requisite to maintain the free ballot,” the *Tribune* continued, the “reign of brute force and terror has passed away forever, at least as far as the city is concerned.” Although this sanguine prediction would be proven false countless times over during the coming years as the Crescent City remained plagued by racial violence, the *Tribune* was quick to point out that black and white Republicans living in rural Louisiana remained in peril. In some of the country parishes, “particularly in the Red river region, no public meeting could be held by the radical Republicans” for fear of public assault. “The bowie-knife and the revolver are still the law of the land amongst those benighted people. The time has come to remove the last vestiges of the dark ages.” Anything less, the *Tribune* concluded, was to accept the failure of republican institutions: “Before the election takes place every citizen in Louisiana must feel that he is secure in the free enjoyment of his political right. No pressure, no threat, no violence should be tolerated.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> New Orleans *Tribune*, May 31, 1867.

For their part, the Democratic press in Louisiana ordinarily denied the existence of electoral violence and claimed that reports of voter harassment were invented by white and black Republicans bent on ruling the state through tyranny. Still, annual exhortations that whites restrain from forcibly preventing blacks from voting are highly suggestive that such actions occurred. On November 3, 1868, the day before the presidential election, the New Orleans *Crescent* begged white Louisianans to abstain from violence so that Republicans would not have an excuse to exclude Democratic votes. “There will be no violence—no intimidation—no disturbance,” the *Crescent* promised. “Even if the Democrats were inclined to adopt the course which is falsely attributed to them by their adversaries, all their interests would deter them from it. They can carry the state by fair voting—why resort to violence?” As further evidence that the Democrats did not need to rely on electoral terror to return to political power, the *Crescent* claimed that a “full Democratic vote will carry New Orleans by 12,000 majority and the State by 20,000. Remember that.” The election must be “quiet, peaceable, [and] orderly,” the newspaper trumpeted, so “that the world should know that New Orleans is in the hands of a civilized, honest and intelligent population, and that the reign of official corruption and African barbarism in Louisiana is soon to terminate.”<sup>42</sup>

Despite these protestations, it was clear in the aftermath of the November 1868 election that black Louisianans and white Republicans had endured widespread verbal intimidation and physical violence that prevented them from voting. In early January 1869, Governor Henry Clay Warmoth addressed the opening of the state legislature and offered a series of sobering reflections on recent events. Likening the previous

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<sup>42</sup> New Orleans *Crescent*, November 3, 1868.

campaign, the “most acrimonious” in history, to a military battle, Warmoth claimed that next “to the late conflict of arms, the last election, more than any former contest, tried the faith in and love of the people for republican institutions.” While there had been instances of “free speech and free meetings” that the New Orleans *Tribune* had called for in the spring of 1867, Warmoth continued that it was “painful to us that all our fellow-citizens did not seem, during the late contest, to be imbued with the almost universal respect entertained by Americans for the right of the free expression of opinion.” In Warmoth’s estimation, the failure to respect basic democratic principles had created an atmosphere where terror was the order of the day and violence the means to subvert civil society. These terrorists, “pledging themselves to disfranchise all and support none for office and give none employment who were so unfortunate as to have first seen the light of the sun on some other land than ours,” resorted to unspeakable violence in order to obtain their objectives. During the “last campaign,” Warmoth exclaimed, the “practice of murder, assassination, intimidation, and violence...prevailed throughout large portions of this State.”<sup>43</sup>

Making himself unmistakably clear, Warmoth pressed his point that the election had been an unmitigated travesty. “In many parishes the late election was the occasion of most disgraceful acts of intimidation,” the governor proclaimed, “culminating in several instances in scenes of massacre shocking to the senses of civilized men.” Although the Democratic press labeled these reports as Republican fabrications, Warmoth remained steadfast. “These instances of savage cruelty, unprovoked, but willful and premeditated, seem to have been instigated by the hostility of certain classes to the laws of Congress, by

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<sup>43</sup> New Orleans *Crescent*, January 5, 1869.

which the government has embodied the colored population into the body politic.”

Moving from a general condemnation of the political climate into a quantitative assessment, Warmoth compared the returns from the presidential election with votes cast in the gubernatorial election of 1868—an election that Warmoth and the Republicans won—not quite six months earlier. According to the governor, fifteen rural parishes that had contributed 10,224 votes for the Republican ticket in April managed to poll only 10 votes for Grant in November.<sup>44</sup> Without the authority to organize militia companies to enforce state law, Warmoth explained that he had been powerless to prevent the “lawless” from prosecuting “their anarchical schemes to the limit of their purpose.” “This course, even beyond what was, perhaps, intended by its authors,” Warmoth concluded, “produced such terror and dismay throughout large portions of the State, that the election was worse than a farce, it was a crime against the whole people.”<sup>45</sup>

Although Warmoth’s speech did not venture into specific accounts of electoral violence, his assertions were supported by the evidence that the Freedmen’s Bureau collected during the entirety of 1868—the Bureau’s last year, for all intents and purposes, in Louisiana. From his post in Shreveport in the northwestern corner of the state, Thomas F. Monroe, Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Caddo and Bossier Parishes, watched the terror unfold throughout the spring, summer, and fall of 1868 as white residents perpetrated a series of brazen outrages against local freedmen that

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<sup>44</sup> The parishes were: DeSoto; Lafayette; St. Landry; Vermillion; Franklin; Jackson; Washington; Bienville; Bossier; Caddo; Claiborne; Morehouse; Union; St. Bernard; and Sabine.

<sup>45</sup> New Orleans *Crescent*, January 5, 1869.

effectively eliminated the Republican vote in the region.<sup>46</sup> As Monroe narrated over the course of these months, voter intimidation was not something that happened only at the polls—as it would have taken a remarkable amount of coordination and an overwhelming show of arms from white brigands to bring about the complete removal of the black electorate in a single day. Rather, electoral violence became closely intertwined with the daily developments of free labor, black efforts to establish autonomous households, and public political meetings that demonstrated African American independence and self-determination in and around Shreveport.

Furthermore, Monroe's reports reveal several important characteristics of electoral violence. First, the cyclical nature of the political calendar had an important effect on how the fractured relationship between whites and blacks in the area evolved throughout the year, as violence intensified after the April 1868 election and reached a frenzied peak in the weeks leading into the November contest between Grant and Horatio Seymour.<sup>47</sup> By election day, whites in Shreveport could well heed the *Crescent's* admonitions to avoid racial terror at the polls. Their work, such as it was, was already done. Monroe's account also highlights the relative rarity of important political days and events. This infrequency seems to have added to the brutality of individual episodes, as it was common for large groups of black and white men to gather, and often come into violent confrontation, on these occasions. With few other chances to demonstrate their

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<sup>46</sup> Much of the rest of this chapter will be narrated from Thomas Monroe's perspective in Shreveport. From this location, Monroe witnessed the truly wretched scale of electoral terrorism, and the tri-monthly reports he submitted to Bureau headquarters in New Orleans are remarkably rich in both personal and communal detail. Although events in Caddo and Bossier Parishes were rather dramatic throughout 1868, other Bureau officials reported levels of violence, especially in rural Louisiana, that were strikingly similar. While the focus from this point forward is predominantly on Louisiana, the shuttering of the Bureau in 1869 meant that no agents were in Kentucky to chronicle the violent political campaigns of the early 1870s once black Kentuckians had earned the franchise.

<sup>47</sup> Rable, *But There Was No Peace*, 76-80.



political virility, white Southerners rarely missed an opportunity to repress blacks violently who, through a simple decision such as casting a ballot, openly asserted their political aspirations.

Second, Monroe also illuminated how the precipitous political changes evident in Reconstruction had added a new spatial dynamic to electoral terrorism because of the increased importance of polling stations and the action of physically casting a ballot. Electoral violence, simply put, was tied to a limited number of discrete physical locations. Although this was true of other forms of violence—home place violence, of course, occurred exclusively in and around the “home”—there were far fewer polling places or court houses than workplaces or emancipation sites. Moreover, these locations were also transitory and time-limited, as other spaces were requisitioned and used for political purposes during certain times of the year.<sup>48</sup>

In this sense, the destruction of property did not figure as prominently in electoral violence as in other situations, such as attacks on a black home, where the structure itself was part of the symbolic understanding of the home and family. To prevent the counting of black votes or African American political activity, therefore, white Southerners found it necessary to directly attack and assault black bodies. Spaces that had been sites of conflict between white men for decades, in other words, were now arenas that black men

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<sup>48</sup> Although I will present this idea in more detail later, it is important to note here how electoral violence could imbue physical spaces with political meaning that would not have ordinarily been considered politicized. For instance, the workplace would become highly political in Bossier and Caddo Parishes during the 1868 campaign as employers drove away workers or refused to fulfill the contracts of laborers that would not join the Democratic Clubs. On other occasions, white landowners evicted black families from their homes or violently entered black homes and assaulted African American men because of their stated intention to vote for the Radical ticket. Even then, however, the political connotations of these spaces remained transitory and always subject to change. At the conclusion of the election, as life returned to something approaching normal, these same physical spaces that had been so politically-charged became relatively innocuous again.

could enter and potentially control. The effort to restrict black access to these politicized locations led to severe violence, as both black and white men viewed the conflict in northwestern Louisiana as part of a struggle to assert individual masculinity through armed confrontation. Altogether, it was deadly, combustible mix.

By the spring of 1868, Thomas Monroe had been serving in an official capacity in northwestern Louisiana for nearly a year, having been appointed Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Caddo and Bossier Parishes the previous May. During February and March 1868, his reports to superiors in New Orleans dealt mainly with the securing of labor contracts for the freedmen, and the devastation wrought by floods for the third consecutive year to plantations along the Red River. Although a jump in cotton prices in March had “caused a great many persons to commence planting, who were determined to allow their plantations to remain idle,” destitution among the freedpeople remained Monroe’s most vocal concern.<sup>49</sup> Monroe’s tone changed dramatically, however, in early May as area whites began to systematically oppress and murder African Americans that had taken a prominent role in local politics during the April election. In his tri-monthly report submitted on May 20, Monroe declared that the “freedmen have been persecuted with unrelenting vigor since the last election, three or four have been killed, and the civil authorities take but little pains if any, to ascertain or arrest any persons thought to be guilty.” According to Monroe, local planters refused to employ any freedmen that had voted for Warmoth, and a general consensus existed among the white populace that local blacks must denounce their right to the franchise in order to secure their safety. “Every

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas F. Monroe to Captain L.H. Warren, March 10, 1868, in Records of the Field Offices For the State of Louisiana, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1863-1872, Record Group 105, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, National Archives Microfilm Publication M1905 (hereafter cited as Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1905), reel no. 100.

citizen seems determined to avoid every thing which tends to give the freedmen justice,” Monroe concluded, “unless he has voted against the Constitution.”<sup>50</sup>

The intensification of electoral violence that Monroe observed in May was significant. If political discussion can sometimes feel all-consuming, the reality of the democratic process is such that meetings, primaries, conventions, and elections are cyclical and occur at distinct times in discrete places. In northwestern Louisiana, such a change in white tactics was evidence of a notable shift towards open hostility to black political activity. This transition was directly related to state and national political developments. While white Louisianans had largely abstained from voting in the statewide elections in early 1868 that ratified the state constitution and brought Warmoth to office, the presidential election in November appeared to provide an opportunity for whites to repudiate the Radicals and discredit the work of Reconstruction.<sup>51</sup> As violent whites adjusted their actions to correspond with this new rubric, actions that had been innocuous now took on great importance. The shifting demands of time also readjusted the spatial dynamics of electoral violence. Physical locations such as the work place and black homes that had been devoid of immediate political ramification suddenly became battlegrounds where whites wantonly terrorized black Louisianans.

From Monroe’s communications in May, we can also begin to discern how political concerns became closely associated with labor practices. Although the employer-employee relationship was often contentious in the postbellum South, the

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<sup>50</sup> Thomas F. Monroe to Captain L.H. Warren, May 20, 1868, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1905, reel no. 100.

<sup>51</sup> Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed*, 114-155; Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction*, 153-159, 185.

added variable of black enfranchisement severely complicated matters.<sup>52</sup> From the perspective of black laborers, their political rights existed separately from their right to contractual work, even if both served as important manifestations of their personal freedom. White planters, however, drew no such distinction, and they acted as though it was their prerogative to direct their workers to vote as the boss demanded. The linking of paid labor to a freedman's individual political beliefs was also a clear effort to undercut black political autonomy. By squeezing the freedmen and making the price of supporting the Radicals too much to bear, these planters attempted to translate their economic clout directly into political power.

Towards the end of May, Monroe provided further insight into white efforts to destroy black political autonomy. Numerous "Complaints have been made by freedpeople living in the vicinity of Scioto Lake, North of Shreveport, of outrages practiced upon them," he began. These protests stemmed from the fact that whites had begun organizing Democratic Clubs in the neighborhood and were "using coercive measures towards the colored people to force them to join them." Although Monroe praised the freedmen who had the "courage" to refuse, he feared that the Bureau would be unable to offer any protection from white retaliation. Many black families in this area, he continued, had "settled upon the Government lands, which have not yet been entered under the Homestead Act." While the freedpeople waited for the land office to open, "the [white] citizens living in that settlement are determined to drive them away from there." With no hope of assistance from the civil authorities, the only option open to

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<sup>52</sup> For an excellent analysis of the politicized nature of work in Louisiana's sugar parishes during Reconstruction, see John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

black families was to bend to white demands and join the Democratic Clubs. To do otherwise was to put oneself in the crosshairs of white terrorists who “endeavor to drive them from their homes.”<sup>53</sup>

In addition to the formation of these Conservative societies, white resentment over black electoral participation led directly to a number of physical assaults and murders. Writing to Bureau headquarters in early June, Monroe claimed that the “intense bitter feelings existing against the Freedmen” in Caddo and Bossier Parishes was “on account of having voted the Radical Ticket” in the spring. On at least two occasions in late May and early June, freedmen were murdered by their white neighbors as a result of these electoral animosities. According to Monroe, a freedman named Bob Owens was taken from his home and hanged near Summer Grove in Caddo Parish on the night of May 26, and another black resident named Tom Ford had been killed in the same community on the fourth of June. Although Monroe gathered a number of witnesses, the civil authorities failed to return any verdict other than that “the deed was committed by some party or parties unknown.” By July, the abuse of the freedmen around Shreveport was so intense that Monroe believed conditions in the country were “worse than immediately after the [Confederate] surrender.” Local blacks were found hung and murdered at short distances from their homes on a daily basis, but it was impossible to bring charges against the perpetrators because of a conspiracy of silence and the unwillingness of the civil authorities to punish any white citizen. The “only reason for

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<sup>53</sup> Thomas F. Monroe to Captain L.H. Warren, May 30, 1868, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1905, reel no. 100.

such a course” of terror, Monroe lamented, “is on account of [the freedmen’s] refusal to join the Democratic Clubs.”<sup>54</sup>

Abuse and voter intimidation continued throughout July and August, as widespread terror became the norm around Shreveport. “The freedmen are working exceedingly well,” Monroe commented exasperatedly in late June, “in localities where they are not in constant fear of being assassinated.” In mid-July, Monroe again reported that freedmen had complained to him that planters “threatened them to attend their Democratic Clubs,” and several even claimed that they had been forced to leave their crops as a result. On other occasions, freedmen were “taken from their homes at night and murdered in cold blood” because they refused to bow to white demands. Seemingly every aspect of black society came under attack, and Monroe noted in August that “Religious meetings have been interfered with since the elections” as a result of white resentment against blacks who had voted independently. In fact, Monroe continued, “the colored people who are determined to have their own opinions in regard to the manner in which they should vote” had had a difficult time remaining as laborers on plantations until their crops could be harvested. While African Americans around Shreveport continued to “do everything they possibly can” to maintain the peace, it was “feared by many that a serious disturbance will take place, if the outrages being committed are not stopped.” The “country,” Monroe concluded with remarkable understatement, “is in a fearful condition.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas F. Monroe to Captain L.H. Warren, June 30, July 10, 1868, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA 1905, reel no. 100.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas F. Monroe to Captain L.H. Warren, July 20, August 20, 1868, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1905, reel no. 100.

As the summer progressed, the personal nature of the electoral violence in Caddo and Bossier Parishes became more and more obvious. If the massacres and race riots of Reconstruction sometimes resulted in indiscriminate slaughter, it was far more common for African Americans around Shreveport to be politically intimidated by the white people that they knew on an individual basis: their employers, neighbors, and, sometimes, former owners. Throughout the political campaigns of 1868, freedmen poured into Monroe's office to lodge complaints that they were being forced to abandon their crops and their homes by angry whites, and Monroe consistently reminded his superiors in New Orleans that black men were being dragged from their households and terrorized and killed by neighboring whites on a nightly basis. In other words, postbellum electoral violence grew directly from relationships that had been drastically altered by the abolition of slavery. As evidenced by white demands that area blacks join the Democratic Clubs, former slaveholders failed to reconcile themselves to a world in which black Southerners might enjoy political autonomy, and the resultant terror became the means through which white Southerners recreated the white man's state that had existed under the slave regime. These personal, violent encounters are also a reminder of the grassroots origins of racial oppression in the post-Civil War South. If resentment against black participation in Southern politics became a general rallying cry of the Democracy, the violence that achieved the removal of the black electorate had to be repeatedly performed on the local level—precinct by precinct—if it were to be effective.

Monroe's worst fears began to materialize in late August as the evident political and personal tensions between area blacks and whites nearly erupted into a riot in Bossier Parish. "The origin of the difficulty," Monroe began, "arose from the fact, that the

freedmen attended their political meetings armed, and had been requested by the citizens to attend the same unarmed, but refused.” The prospect of black men brandishing guns and advocating Radical ideas was anathema to the white population, and a committee of citizens ordered a local sheriff to “interview” the freedmen and request them to leave their weapons at home. After discussing the matter with a few influential black men, however, “the leaders informed him [the sheriff] that they could not do so, claiming that the whites had threatened to break up their meetings, and to kill off some of their leaders.” By this point, the morning of August 24, the sheriff “firmly believed” a riot was about to occur, and he called on the Commander of the Port of Shreveport to send troops to suppress the disturbance. In the meantime, rumors surfaced that a freedman named Williams, “leader of the Republican Club in Bossier,” had called for a meeting at his house at 10 o’clock, at which the freedmen had arrived armed and “used very threatening language, saying that they intended to assume control of the Country, and dictate what laws should be observed.” Before Monroe could reach the neighborhood with a body of soldiers, however, over 150 white men from the surrounding country gathered and arrested over 60 freedmen that attended the Republican meeting. Miraculously, no one was wounded. “I believe every thing is all quiet again,” Monroe concluded.<sup>56</sup>

The decision of blacks in Bossier Parish to attend their political meetings while armed, and the white response, revealed yet another important element of electoral violence. Nineteenth century politics were notoriously violent, and, as public displays of martial manhood, they provided an arena where men could stake their claims to be

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<sup>56</sup> Thomas F. Monroe to Captain L.H. Warren, August 31, 1868, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1905, reel no. 100.



politically relevant.<sup>57</sup> After the Civil War, it was common for men to form quasi-military units in order to demonstrate political camaraderie, and it is evident that blacks in Shreveport were participating in this public ritual.<sup>58</sup> According to Thomas Monroe's tri-monthly report of August 31, 1868, the "freedmen had regularly organized military companies officered by Captains and Lieut's" in the weeks preceding the near-riot in Bossier Parish.<sup>59</sup>

To local blacks, arming themselves was a necessity born of the South's violent political culture and the more immediate threat posed by whites who had demonstrated an alarming willingness to murder black Republicans. In other words, openly carrying weapons to political meetings served both to protect black men and establish their civic legitimacy by partaking in the same customs that white Southerners deemed politically expedient. For their part, however, the white citizens of Caddo and Bossier Parishes, and across the South, flatly denied that blacks had any right to display weapons in public. According to ex-Confederates, guns in the hands of black men would invariably lead to racial massacres—despite all the evidence that pointed to the exact opposite conclusion. The violence that resulted from the attempts to disarm these black political meetings, yet

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<sup>57</sup> For the most complete discussions of "martial manhood," see Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Emberton, *Beyond Redemption*. For a case study of several parishes in Louisiana, see Samuel C. Hyde, *Pistols and Politics: The Dilemma of Democracy in Louisiana's Florida Parishes, 1810-1899* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996).

<sup>58</sup> The White Leagues and other militia units formed by ex-Confederates were the most infamous example of this tendency, but many African American men participated in public displays of martial masculinity as well. Such displays were anathema to white Southerners. See Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*; Emberton, *Beyond Redemption*.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas F. Monroe to Captain L.H. Warren, August 31, 1868, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1905, reel no. 100.

again, stemmed from the unwillingness of white Southerners to recognize the humanity of blacks and their suitability to compose a part of the body politic.<sup>60</sup>

The near-riot in late August also further revealed the shifting spatial dynamics of electoral violence in Bossier and Caddo Parishes. The transitory nature of voting sites and their relative rarity in the course of daily life meant that other spaces necessarily became charged with political meaning—and, in this instance, none more so than the black home of the leader of the Republican Club in Bossier Parish. To area whites, this particular site represented a stronghold of Republican activity, and it contained the potential to pose a serious threat to white political power. For the freedmen, however, this household became the center of their political world during a moment in which it was apparent that their decision to participate in the public sphere had placed their lives in danger.<sup>61</sup> That the black men allegedly used “threatening language” and claimed the right to control the parish provided a heightened sense of urgency for area whites. It should also be noted, however, that area planters had connected black political autonomy with the African American household on a consistent basis since they intensified their violent campaign in May. After all, as a punishment for not joining the Democratic Clubs, white terrorists had invaded black homes and forced families to leave their land in search of physical safety. The implications of such violence were important, and they

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<sup>60</sup> Carole Emberton has clearly articulated the conundrum that faced black men who staked their claims to citizenship on military service and the martial idea. As Emberton has concluded, white Southerners were extremely resistant to such proclamations of black masculinity, and at the same time the decision to focus on military service as the primary pathway to black citizenship foreclosed opportunities that might have arisen in other aspects of life. See Emberton, *Beyond Redemption*. For two analyses of the situation in Kentucky, see Lewis, “Democratic Partisan Militia”; Astor, *Rebels on the Border*.

<sup>61</sup> On the importance of the household in creating political authority, see McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*.

were similar to the connotations of earlier labor struggles: by making black men dependent, white terrorists would strip them of their political legitimacy.<sup>62</sup>

Back on the ground in Bossier Parish, the fallout from the unrest in late August began almost immediately. In early September, a freedman named Henry Jones, “one of the leaders of the intended riot,” was taken from his home at night “by a party of unknown men” and shot before being left for dead on a burning brush pile. Although he managed to crawl to safety after his attackers fled, white terrorists in the region were just getting started. By mid-September, Monroe bemoaned that Caddo Parish was essentially lawless, as the recently elected Justice of the Peace had been threatened with death should he take his seat. As a result, freedmen were “constantly being taken from their houses at night and either killed or forced to leave their crops and everything they possess.” With the country in such a state of agitation, it was only a matter of time before things spun out of control.

The precipitating event occurred in late September when a white man named Gibson stopped at Shady Grove, a plantation along the Red River in Bossier Parish, on his return to Arkansas. While there, Gibson became intoxicated and “demanded [to know] if there were any radical negroes there.” When a fellow carouser pointed in jest to an old freedman lying on the porch, Gibson “snapped a cap at him” and “fired at him with the intention of shooting him” when the man ran away. After rumors circulated that the old man had been killed, area freedmen took Gibson into custody, appropriated \$200

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<sup>62</sup> An individual’s political rights in America, especially in the South, had long been premised on the idea of independence. By making the freedmen “dependent,” these violent whites were transferring onto them a status that had been indelibly associated with enslaved peoples. See William J. Cooper, Jr., *Liberty and Slavery: Southern Politics to 1860* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000). For an insightful examination of the decision by Southerners to seek “dependence” in order to secure protection in the postbellum South, see Gregory P. Downs, *Declarations of Dependence: The Long Reconstruction of Popular Politics in the South, 1861-1908* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

from him, and brought him back to Shady Grove where they “put a chain around his neck and tied him to a tree and otherwise illtreated him.” When news of the outrage spread, white men began to congregate at Shady Grove, and they demanded, and obtained, Gibson’s release before turning him over to the civil authorities. As no freedmen consented to give testimony because they claimed no justice would be done, however, Gibson was released. The following day, Gibson “returned with a party of 62 men to the Red River for the purpose of procuring his money and avenging himself on all parties who were implicated in the outrages inflicted on him.”<sup>63</sup> It would be a bloodbath.

For nearly two weeks anarchy reigned around Shreveport. By October 12, Monroe had gathered all the information he dared, and he submitted a lengthy report to Lieutenant J.M. Lee that hinted at the terror on the eve of the November election. According to Monroe, Gibson and the band of men from Arkansas returned to Bossier Parish and rode from plantation to plantation, shooting down and murdering freedmen indiscriminately. At least 13 men and one woman had been killed, but Monroe surmised “probably 8 or 10 more” as well. Although the Arkansans returned home after being threatened with arrest, a number of blacks armed themselves in Shreveport and killed two white citizens of the city named Ogden and Brownlee in retaliation for their supposed involvement in the slaughter. In response, white men from the surrounding regions, “believing that a general massacre was to take place,” commenced pursuing all of the freedmen allegedly involved in the murders of Ogden and Brownlee. “From all the information that I can gain,” Monroe lamented, “the number of freedmen killed will reach nearly One hundred.” It was impossible to discover the names of the freedmen that

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<sup>63</sup> Thomas F. Monroe to Captain L.H. Warren, September 10, 20, 1868, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1905, reel no. 100; Thomas F. Monroe to Brevet Major B.F. Hutchins, September 30, 1868, in *Ibid.*

had been killed, however, or even to make a thorough investigation of the massacre. “If I should attempt it,” Monroe commented, “I am of the opinion that I would share the fate of some of the missing freedmen.” The atmosphere was so “intensely bitter,” in fact, that Monroe cautioned Lee that “no part of the within should be published, although true in every particular.”<sup>64</sup>

The remaining days until the election passed with yet more murders and assaults, but nothing that reached the level of carnage of the Bossier “riot.” On October 14, Charles Wasson murdered the freedmen Robert Gray, elected Justice of the Peace for Caddo Parish in March, in cold blood on Texas Street in Shreveport because “he held radical principles,” and another body was found floating in the Red River the same day. Monroe reported that the freedmen were “terribly alarmed, they will be compelled to vote as their Employers dictate.” During late October, armed “bodies of [white] men” continued to scour Bossier Parish for any freedmen implicated in the murders of Ogden and Brownlee, and the “feeling existing against those who favor the election of Grant & Colfax” was very bitter. In fact, nearly all the “white men and the majority of the leading colored men who have taken any part in political matters” had already left the parish, or were planning to, in preparation for the upcoming election. “Dead bodies continue to float down the River from Bossier Parish.” By the day of the election, the white terrorists had accomplished their objective. “The election passed off very quietly in both Parishes,” Monroe noted, “from the fact that there was no opposition, two votes alone being cast for Grant and Colfax in the Parishes of Bossier & Caddo.” “No threats were

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<sup>64</sup> Thomas F. Monroe to Lieutenant J.M. Lee, October 12, 1868, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1905, reel no. 100.

made on the day of the election,” Monroe continued, “but the freedmen were afraid to express themselves upon the subject of politics since the late riot in the locality.”<sup>65</sup>

The continued focus of whites around Shreveport on patrolling the physical spaces associated with voting is crucial, and it speaks to both the cyclical and spatial tendencies of electoral violence. In chronological terms, the rampant white terrorism in Caddo and Bossier Parishes had evolved alongside the electoral calendar throughout 1868, but, despite the lack of violence on election day, it was apparent that whites remained vigilant. For all of the work these whites had done, after all, was intended to preserve the racial sanctity of the voting booth. Everything that they had done since May had built towards this goal, and the roving bands of white men who traversed the parishes in the days before the election were a lurking reminder of the length to which white terror had gone—and of how much further it might yet go. For as much as other spaces had become politicized, the physical site where votes were cast remained the most sacrosanct to white Southerners. In the end, only a handful of votes were cast for Grant, and Monroe probably wondered how even those ballots had managed to sneak through. It was a result such as this that made the expense of time and energy worthwhile to the white terrorists. Political participation had become infused with display and ritual in northwestern Louisiana in 1868, and the violent white supremacists were relentless until the bitter end. Not only had blacks in Bossier and Caddo Parish been denied the opportunity to physically cast a ballot, they had removed themselves from the vicinity on the day of the election so as to prevent further bloodshed. The political spaces that

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<sup>65</sup> Thomas F. Monroe to Brevet Major B.F. Hutchins, October 20, 31, November 10, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1905, reel no. 100.

mattered so much, the sites that had led to so much bloodshed, would remain lily white for the time being.

The final weeks of Monroe's appointment—the final weeks of the Bureau's existence in Louisiana—passed with few incidents as the excitement from the election withered and life returned to what passed for normal along the Red River. The “white people now pursue altogether a different course,” Monroe concluded with astounding optimism, “they have ascertained that the freedmen must be fairly dealt with in order to become good laborers.”<sup>66</sup> At the conclusion of the election, it was apparent, white planters no longer needed to violently coerce their workers in order to control the potential black vote. The workplace, Monroe indicated, no longer retained the political energy that had made it such a contested space throughout the preceding year. There would still be violence between employers and employees, but it would be different—at least for a while. And so Thomas Monroe left Shreveport, the record of terror he compiled astonishing in all of its cruelty, longevity, and its abrupt end.

From a larger perspective of Monroe's description of daily life in Shreveport, the implications of white resistance to black political legitimacy become apparent. Clearly, local whites resented the statewide enfranchisement of black males in March, and the subsequent election of Henry C. Warmoth in April reinforced a feeling of paranoia that black political activity would lead to “Africanization” and the further entrenchment of the Radicals across Louisiana. These electoral results would have dire consequences for many black families, as whites promptly dismissed laborers, drove homesteaders away,

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<sup>66</sup> Thomas F. Monroe to Brevet Major B.F. Hutchins, November 20, 30, December 10, 20, 1868, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1905, reel no. 100.

and often physically attacked those individuals who were identified as playing an active role in the spring's political campaign through voting for the Republican ticket.

If these were the immediate effects, however, the ultimate goal of this electorally-charged violence went much deeper. In short, by harassing, abusing, and murdering local blacks as part of the effort to convince them to join the Democratic Clubs, the white citizens of Shreveport attempted to force the freedmen to participate in their own political subversion. White terror, in this sense, would do more than dissolve the Republican vote; it would emasculate African Americans by forcing them to vote the Democratic ticket against their will. This was exactly what the editors of the *Lexington Observer & Reporter* had in mind when they demanded a “White man’s State”—a political community where personal belonging and legitimacy were defined by the color of one’s skin and the racial overtones of one’s politics. White men who chose to vote the Democratic ticket were deemed valid by such racial terrorism. Blacks and their white allies in the Republican Party were delegitimized by the very fact that they were forced to endure such violence with no assistance from the civil authorities. In the postbellum South, submission, in whatever form it came, was closely aligned with the attitudes that had predominated under slavery. Citizens, it was clear, were not to be subservient.<sup>67</sup>

The near-riot in Bossier Parish amid the disarmament stir in late August, and the subsequent slaughter of freedmen in September, points to yet another element of electoral violence—the importance that white men placed on monopolizing legitimate political violence in the postbellum South. The distinction that white terrorists, and hooligans such as the Arkansan Gibson, drew between their own actions and the decision of blacks

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<sup>67</sup> John David Smith, *We Ask Only for Even-Handed Justice: Black Voices from Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 57-73.



to murder Ogden and Brownlee over their alleged involvement in earlier violent deaths was clear and absolute. When whites in Bossier Parish drove away and murdered freedmen who associated with the Radicals, these whites believed that they were exercising force that was essential to preserving free government in their city and state.

The refusal of the civil authorities to prosecute guilty parties, either because they agreed with the terrorism or they were intimidated into inaction, was an important component of this belief, as it reinforced the notion that the state sanctioned such violence when it was directed against the freedmen. On the contrary, black violence against whites was deemed anarchical, illegitimate, and an ominous warning of the coming subversion of civil society. As a result, the butchery of over a hundred blacks, and the continued scouring of the country for more alleged perpetrators of Ogden and Brownlee's murder, was fairly representative of other white responses to black retaliation in the postbellum era.<sup>68</sup> More than anything else, it was the perpetuation of this outlook—the belief that black men must be controlled before they violently established a racial-tyranny in the South—that allowed shocking amounts of electoral terrorism to make a mockery of the democratic process. For terrorists bent on a white man's state, after all, few things could have been more alarming than black votes electing black men to public office.

This violent phenomenon repeated itself throughout Louisiana during the 1868 campaign season. From Natchitoches, Louisiana, E.H. Hosner, Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Natchitoches, Sabine, and Winn Parishes, claimed that the day of the election passed with relative quiet, but he was "Satisfied that the freedmen were afraid to

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<sup>68</sup> The most obvious point of comparison would be the Colfax massacre, but other race "riots" resulted in shockingly high death tolls as well. See Keith, *The Colfax Massacre*.

vote as they wished to and were forced to vote the democratic [*sic*] ticket. Many did not vote at all.” As had been the case in Shreveport, Hosner indicated that white terrorists around Natchitoches had been extremely active in targeting black men who had identified themselves as Republicans. On the night of November 2, the eve of the election, one freedman had been murdered and another severely outraged because of their Radical proclivities. According to Hosner, “A fearful & outrageous murder Was Committed in Natchitoches Parish near Allen” on the second of November. “In this instance an honest, hospitable, & industrious freedman was shot and Killed in a Cowardly and dastardly manner while in his own house with his family” present. Such violence was common in Natchitoches, Hosner confirmed, and many freedmen were desirous of leaving the localities where “gangs” and “marauders” roamed at will—if they were able to collect their belongings and take their personal property with them.<sup>69</sup>

During the same evening, another freedman “in the same neighborhood” named “Richard Faulkner was taken out of his bed and into the wood” for nearly a half-mile. Once there, a group of white men commenced to whip and beat Faulkner unmercifully before they made him “promise to vote the democratic ticket the next day.” Finally, they robbed him of all of his money, destroyed the personal papers he kept in his home, and ordered that he leave the neighborhood. According to Hosner, this attack was similar to others that had been perpetrated against freedmen in Natchitoches Parish because they were “colored men and radicals.” In late October, a number of African Americans were trapped in a residence in the town by a group of white men who were angry that one of

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<sup>69</sup> E.H. Hosner to Brevet Major B.F. Hutchins, November 10, 1868, in Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1905, reel no. 90.

the freedmen had been seen leaving the local offices of the Freedmen's Bureau.<sup>70</sup> As powerful as the report of such an encounter might be, white vigilantes clearly realized that direct, personal assaults were far more convincing in terrorizing potential black voters. The symbolism of an extraordinary massacre like the New Orleans race riot of played prominently in national discussions of Reconstruction policy—the horse-whipping and threatening of a local Republican leader the night before an election, on the other hand, was fairly effective in limiting the vote in a defined locale.

Finally, Monroe's account of electoral terrorism in the communities surrounding Shreveport also highlights the role that African Americans believed the federal government could play in mitigating the worst effects of politicized violence. By their own admission, the freedmen in Caddo and Bossier Parishes had long since abandoned the notion that they might achieve redress through the civil authorities, even refusing to give testimony in cases where they had directly witnessed the commission of a violent crime. And yet, even on the eve of the November election, Monroe continued to meet with local African Americans who brought complaints in the hope that the Bureau might offer them tangible assistance. While Monroe lamented that he could often do no more than forward reports of the outrages that the freedmen endured to his superiors, his simple availability provided black Southerners with a physical reminder of their freedom, and became symbolic of national efforts to create an equitable, biracial republic. As in so many other aspects of daily life in the postbellum South, the presence of the federal government through the Freedmen's Bureau provided black Southerners with a layer of potential protection that had not existed under slavery, yet another marker that

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

demonstrated how the political situation of the freedmen had been revolutionized by the changes of Reconstruction. Perhaps even more important, however, was the sense that blacks who complained to the Freedmen's Bureau did so because they believed that they were being denied their civic rights to political self-determination. The black Southerners who made the trip to visit Monroe's office, in other words, were not supplicants seeking charity—they were potential citizens demanding that a government that had, at least rhetorically, championed racial equality make good on their promises.

For their part, white Southerners appeared to have surmised by the 1868 campaign that any real challenge to their political dominance would require more than a federal presence—it would require Union troops. Despite fiery rhetoric that continued to execrate the possibility of Radical tyranny and the “Africanization” of the South, electoral terror had proven remarkably effective in suppressing the black vote. It would continue to do so wherever it was allowed to continue unabated. Recall that Monroe believed that a serious disturbance had been averted in late August 1868 when several dozen soldiers were dispatched to Bossier Parish. As soon as they left, however, the “calm” that supposedly existed quickly vanished.<sup>71</sup> The following summer, Captain Frank M. Cone of the Twenty-Fifth Colored Infantry Regiment noted a similar state of affairs in St. Landry Parish. Cone and his men, sent to Opelousas in the aftermath of a massacre that had occurred the previous September and October, had managed to maintain a semblance of order, but the officer did not believe that any lasting truce had been effected. According to Cone, area freedmen and loyal whites “live in hourly dread of our removal, when the vengeance of their oppressors, rendered more keen by our visit,

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<sup>71</sup> Thomas F. Monroe to Captain L.H. Warren, August 31, 1868, in Freedmen's Bureau, NA M1905, reel no. 100.

will vent its wrath upon them, only more cruelly and mercilessly.” Completely abandoned by the civil authorities, black men refused to meet with Cone because they were “afraid to incur the suspicions which would so readily attach to their visits to me, influenced as they are...by the conviction that upon the probable early departure of the troops, they will be abandoned to the mercies of the rebel faction.”<sup>72</sup>

Such was the effect of everyday electoral violence. Intimidated at the polls, forced to join Democratic Clubs or leave their homes, and lynched on a nightly basis for supporting the Radicals, black Southerners faced nearly impossible odds in the quest for full political inclusion into the American state. To defend their rights, black men formed armed political companies and demanded that the federal government protect their persons, the former of which fueled white paranoia of a coming race war while the latter further reinforced the belief among white Southerners that black political rights were singularly supported by outside force. These conditions, quite clearly, had been dictated by white terrorists who refused to acknowledge black political legitimacy, but reality mattered less than the continued insistence on white racial hegemony. As Reconstruction continued into the 1870s, of course, the story was not entirely one-sided, and black men continued to serve in offices and hold ranks that would have been unthinkable only a few years earlier. At times, the federal government maintained its willingness to intervene in Southern politics when racial terrorism became particularly detrimental to national sovereignty, but the extent of daily and cyclical oppression meant that it would have been nearly impossible to force biracial republicanism onto the white South without an

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<sup>72</sup> Frank M. Cone to George Baldey, May 16, 1869, in United States Army Twenty-Fifth Colored Infantry Regiment Letterbook, 1869, Mss. 4912, Special Collections, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

extensive occupying force over an indeterminate number of years.<sup>73</sup> As Joel Williamson once wrote, “The democratic faith implicit in Radical Reconstruction was almost unthinkable” to the white South, “it sat crosswise over the molds of what ought to be racially and socially.”<sup>74</sup> Few developments illustrated this point better than the unrelenting pressure of electoral terrorism.

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<sup>73</sup> In Louisiana, such federal intervention would finally come to an end in 1875. See Hogue, *Uncivil War*.

<sup>74</sup> Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black/White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 80.

## Conclusion – Towards the Nadir: The Legacy of Everyday Racial Violence

In the mid-1950s, Rayford Whittingham Logan coined the term the “nadir” of American race relations to describe the period from the official end of Reconstruction in 1877 to 1901, an era in which he claimed “the Negro’s status in American society” reached its lowest ebb. Although other historians have questioned Logan’s periodization, and added a great deal of nuance through localized studies that have assessed race relations in specific cities or geographic regions, the general consensus remains that the failures of Reconstruction led to an abandonment of African Americans by the federal government, and a reign of lynching, murder, voter harassment, and widespread, systematic oppression that would not be reconciled until the Civil Rights Movements of the twentieth century—if even then.<sup>1</sup> From a wider view of the American South, such a characterization remains startlingly appealing, both in the sense that it emphasizes the nation’s democratic potential, emblazoned in our national charter by the three Reconstruction Amendments, and lays the blame for this failure at the feet of unrepentant white terrorists and demagogues who refused to admit the humanity of black Americans. There was something very real, and visceral, in Thomas Monroe’s confessions in October 1868 that he dare not bring the murderous perpetrators of the slaughter in Bossier Parish to public knowledge. He, quite rightly, feared for his own life at the hands of these same men: “I have been informed from reliable source [*sic*] that I would have been killed on

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<sup>1</sup> Rayford Whittingham Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* (New York: Dial Press, 1954), 52.

the night of Oct 1<sup>st</sup> had it not been for the intercession of some prudent and substantial men.” The violent, simply put, had borne away the fruits of our nation’s gravest test.<sup>2</sup>

An examination of the everyday violence of Reconstruction, however, asks that scholars understand racial violence as a continuous, integral component of American public life that eschews characterizations into various peaks and valleys of intensity based on national political developments. This was the demented genius behind the implementation of daily racial terror—it became so ingrained in Southern life that it was accepted as part of the cost of doing business. The methodical suppression and murder of black voters in Caddo and Bossier Parishes in 1868, and in a thousand other locales across the South, directly contradicts every stated value of the American republic. And yet, despite the absolute annihilation of the democratic process, the only real backlash that whites in northwestern Louisiana received was the stinging criticism of Governor Henry C. Warmoth. The local civil authorities, for whatever reason, were either powerless to stop the rogues or actively aiding and abetting them. If it was possible, in fact, a couple of years of Reconstruction had left white Southerners even more embittered and angry than the Confederate surrender; what had been their worst fears, so it seemed, had now become a reality. To these individuals, the postbellum period was less an opportunity to revamp the national republic than it was a “new civil war within the Southern states” that would allow the restoration of white supremacy in all of its horror. While the South would officially be redeemed in 1876 when South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana established the return to “home rule,” black Southerners in Caddo and Bossier

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas F. Monroe to Lieutenant J.M. Lee, October 12, 1868, in in Records of the Field Offices For the State of Louisiana, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1863-1872, Record Group 105, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, National Archives Microfilm Publication M1905 (hereafter cited as Freedmen’s Bureau, NA M1905), reel no. 100.



Parishes might well have asked what had taken outsiders so long to realize their situation?<sup>3</sup>

For all of its drawbacks, however, the conceptualization of the nadir of American race relations beginning with the downfall of Reconstruction does emphasize one important element of postbellum politics. In short, the restoration of white supremacy was not achieved in a single action or violent massacre; rather, it was a sustained, concerted, and manipulative process that involved daily oppression and continued willingness on the part of Southern whites to subvert federal law and the rights of African Americans. This progression unfolded at different rates during different times in different places, but everything seemed to be working its way toward the reestablishment of the “white man’s State.”

Let us return to the aftermath of the August 1871 riot in Frankfort, Kentucky. Despite the power that Conservative Democrats had exercised in the Commonwealth since the end of the Civil War, their persistent refusal to allow black testimony in state courts meant that, in egregious circumstances, federal courts could agree to hear criminal cases. The Frankfort killings, “the most publicized lynchings in Kentucky during Reconstruction,” were so widely debated in the Commonwealth, however, that white leaders from both parties condemned these actions in the hope that further violence against black citizens in Frankfort would be prevented. To quell criticism that they had no interest in prosecuting the mob, state leaders pressed Franklin County officials to investigate the matter thoroughly. Still, despite all the sound and fury, the grand jury

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<sup>3</sup> Logan, *Negro in American Life and Thought*, 9-11.

returned a familiar verdict: the two black men had been murdered, they concluded, by parties unknown.<sup>4</sup>

In most cases, such a finding would have concluded the investigation. In this instance, however, a Deputy United States Marshal arrested three white men—out of a mob of 250 who had not worn disguises—and murder charges were brought against them in the United States district court of Judge Bland Ballard. One of the men, Howard Smith, managed to obtain the legal services of one of Kentucky’s leading Republicans, John Marshall Harlan.<sup>5</sup> With Harlan’s assistance, the men managed to get the case delayed. In the meantime, the state legislature finally brought the Commonwealth into compliance with federal directives and granted black Kentuckians the right to testify in state courts. Accordingly, the case was quickly transferred to the Franklin County Circuit Court where all three men won easy acquittals.<sup>6</sup> And there it was, just another travesty in a litany of outrages that denied black Southerners justice and deemed them, as a group, unfit for full inclusion in the American republic.

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<sup>4</sup> George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and “Legal Lynchings”* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 49-51.

<sup>5</sup> Harlan is an extremely interesting figure in the development of American race relations. He is probably best remembered as the sole *Plessy* dissenter, but his views on race in 1871 were vastly different than they would be by the end of the nineteenth century. According to historian Michael J. Klarman, Harlan was the one Supreme Court justice who seemed to “defy his past” in the *Plessy* decision: “Harlan had been a slave owner in Kentucky. Although he had fought for the Union, he opposed emancipation. As a postwar politician, he opposed the Thirteenth Amendment and the Civil Rights Acts of 1866 and 1875. Harlan’s judicial decisions suggest that his views on race may have changed after he ascended to the Court in 1877.” See, Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 16-17.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, 51.

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